

CHAPTER SIX

Contemplation of the Invisible and its Limits

Though Islamic contemplation is a free form of worship as there are no limitations to what a human being can experience or imagine – whether it is visible like the sun, the rivers and the planets, or invisible, like the angels and jinns – there is, nevertheless, one restriction, namely, the contemplation of the Divine Being Himself. Not only is it forbidden, but it is also impossible since none but God Himself knows what He really is. The Almighty says about Himself in the Qur’an: “He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth...There is nothing whatever like Him, and He is the One Who hears and sees [all things]” (42:11).

Moreover, God is free from the limits of time and space that confine humankind. Indeed, human beings cannot visualize an event without reference to a certain time and place, nor can they visualize anything without reference to a previous experience of their own. Try, for instance, to imagine a new type of animal, unlike any animal you know. Or try to imagine a color different from the colors you have already seen. No matter how hard you try, you will not be able to imagine that animal without drawing on what you know of animals: you may give it wings and attach them to its head, or attach ears onto its legs, yet the wings, the ears and the legs are all parts of animal bodies you already know. Furthermore, human beings can only hear within certain waves and vibrations – in which respect they are surpassed by many other animals and birds.

As previously stated, people still know very little about the brain and the nervous system that characterize them as human beings. The knowledge about their minds, souls and psyches are hidden secrets and protected treasures. If these are the limits of human beings in this transient world, then how can they have the audacity to presume that they could ever contemplate He Whom “no vision can grasp, but His grasp

is over all vision” (6:103), He Who is not limited by time, since He is the One Who created time? Ibn Mas‘ūd said: “For your Lord, there is no night nor day. The light of heaven and earth derive from the light of His face...When He sits in judgment on the Last Day, the earth will shine with His light.”¹ Scholars also affirm that whatever one imagines about the Divine Being, He is totally different from that. Ibn ‘Abbās said: “Some people tried to contemplate the Almighty, but the Prophet said to them: ‘Contemplate the creation of God and not God Himself, for you can never give Him His due.’”² Al-Ghazālī wrote a poem that explains this point beautifully:

Tell those who can conceive my words:
 Be brief; the answer is so long.
 A hidden mystery there lies
 Beyond the reach of the best of minds.
 Where is the essence of the soul?
 Can you behold it, or know how it roams?
 The breaths, can you enumerate them?
 No! You shall miss them all.
 And where lies the mind? Where lie the cares
 When you are overcome by sleep? Tell me, you ignorant!
 The bread you eat, you know not how,
 Nor how the urine passes through you!
 If you fail so much to comprehend
 Organs which your body holds,
 How can you grasp the One, firm on the throne?
 Ask not how the Word was revealed,
 How the Lord speaks, or how He sees.
 My word, this is but superfluous!
 He has no ‘where’ nor ‘how’
 But He is Lord of ‘how’
 And He knows how the ‘how’ changes.
 He, the Sublime in Attributes and Being
 And Higher than all which you may say.³

The Attributes of God are of the same nature as His Being. Since the reality of the Divine Being can be known and understood only by Him, so can His Divine Attributes. However, believers can appreciate the beauty of these Attributes and this will guide them to the Divine Being in accordance with the level of their belief. Ibn ‘Abbās said:

The Divine Being is shaded by His glorious Attributes and His Attributes are shaded by His deeds. So how do you feel about a Divine beauty shaded by Attributes of perfection, and adorned with epithets of grandeur and splendor?⁴

If Muslims are not allowed to contemplate the Divine Being, since they cannot grasp His sublime existence with their human senses and mind, then why are they encouraged to contemplate death, the barrier (*barzakh*) and the hereafter, all of which are invisible phenomena and inconceivable by our worldly means? The answer to this question is that although all these phenomena may have qualities inaccessible to the believers’ minds in this world, they are in fact part of God’s creation. They also have similitudes in this world. For instance, whoever experiences the mysteries of sleep, its nightmares and pleasant dreams, may be able to visualize death, the grave and the barrier. And whoever contemplates the lives of human beings in the darkness of the embryonic stage, and compares it with their lives after birth and in adulthood, may be able to visualize the vastness of what they will experience after they are freed by death from the material chains of this world. If a fetus in its mother’s womb could be told about the world with its sun, moon, rivers, trees and fruits, it would not be able to visualize them because its experience is limited to its dark world. There, it does not need to eat, drink or breathe, since all the nourishment it needs is provided by the placenta or comes through the umbilical cord – which are the most important organs for its life. Indeed, they provide the fetus with ‘ready-made’ liquid nutrients and oxygen from the mother, and takes away the carbon dioxide and other wastes. Then, when the birth takes place and the fetus comes out into our world, the umbilical cord is severed and the placenta, which will have completed its duty, is buried or disposed of in some other way. No one will care about it, nor will any poet recite an elegy over its grave!

Our world is like a large womb, where the body plays the same role as the placenta in the womb. When the hour of death comes, the soul moves into a higher dimension of life in the barrier, which is so much larger and more complex than this world that it no longer needs the body (in the same way that the newborn no longer needs its placenta), and the body is buried. Thus, human beings keep moving from one stage into a higher one like a rocket, part of which, at the end of every stage and the consumption of its fuel, separates from its main body to make it go faster, with a lighter weight and a greater energy. This reminds us of the phrase, “Living people are asleep; they wake up when they die,” and of the Arab saying: “Wakeful living is a slumber; death is waking; and man, between them, is a moving shadow.”

Al-Ghazālī in his *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* uses this image of the fetus in the womb to compare life in this world, life after death and life in the hereafter in a very impressive narrative which provokes contemplation in the unseen vastness of our future life in the next world. He writes:

Man has two births: one is his “proceeding from between the backbone and the ribs” [the bodies of his father and mother] to the custody of the womb, where he is “in a place of rest, firmly fixed, for a period determined.” Then he follows in the path of perfection from a drop of sperm, to a clot, then into a morsel of flesh. The second birth is when he proceeds from the narrow womb into the wider world. The ratio of the greater resurrection to the lesser one is like that of the wide world to the narrow womb. The ratio of the wide world of the hereafter to the transient world is like that of the wide world to the narrow womb, even wider and greater.⁵

Similarly, the bliss of paradise and all its fruits, flowing springs and beauties, have their similitude in our present world, although, of course, they are but trifles in comparison with what is offered in paradise. The Prophet is quoted to have said in a *ḥadīth qudsī*: “The Almighty said: ‘I have prepared for my virtuous servants (a paradise) that no eye has seen, no ear has heard and no human mind has ever thought of.’”⁶ Nevertheless, the similitude between the bliss of the transient world and that of the hereafter is revealing. The Qur’an

declares that when the happy believers are admitted to paradise, they will be delighted to find fruits similar to what they ate in their former lives, only they will be finer and much more delectable. Their spouses will also be much more beautiful and pleasing in their companionship:

Give glad tidings to those who believe and do righteous deeds that their portion shall be gardens beneath which rivers flow. Whenever they are granted fruits therefrom they will say: “Why, this is what was granted to us as sustenance before!” – for they shall be given things in similitude. And they shall have companions pure and holy, and they shall abide therein forever. (2:25)

This similarity thus confirms the ability of the Muslim to contemplate the pleasures of the hereafter in spite of the fact that their reality is beyond human comprehension. The same may be said of torment in hell. In this world, fire burns bodies and distorts faces. It is perhaps the severest torment imaginable in this world, which is why many worshippers shudder at the sight of flames, as they remind them of the fire in hell. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, in his *Kitāb al-Zuhd* (The Book of Asceticism), relates that Ibn Mas‘ūd and al-Rabī‘ ibn Khaytham were once on the bank of the Euphrates. When al-Rabī‘ saw the blacksmiths heating ironware in their forge fire, the flaming blaze reminded him of hellfire, and he was so frightened that he collapsed unconscious. Ibn Mas‘ūd had to carry him home, where he lay unconscious from noon until the dawn of the following day.⁷ Though his emotional reaction was too much for his psychological endurance, his condition was initiated by a cognitive associative memory in which he did not intend to lose touch with reality. The whole episode clearly demonstrates that it is possible for the believer to contemplate hellfire, despite its great difference from fire in this world. The Prophet described the inferno of the hereafter in the following words:

Hell was fuelled for a thousand years until it turned red; then it was fuelled for another thousand years until it turned white; then it was further fuelled for a thousand years until it turned pitch black.⁸

In a related statement, Ibn ʿAbbās is reported to have said: “If one drop of the infernal tree, Zaqqūm, were tossed onto this world, it would ruin the life resources of all its inhabitants.”⁹

Many early and modern scholars and worshippers have recorded their moving experiences of meditating on the nature of death, the barrier and the hereafter. Among these is al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī who compiled the *Kitāb al-Tawāhhum* (The Book of Imagination) in which he describes the tribulations of death, the bliss of paradise and the torment of hell. He moves readers to a visualization and contemplation of these transcendental images, describing them so minutely and effectively that readers can imagine themselves actually experiencing these colossal events. Here is how he describes the tribulations of death and resurrection:

You imagine yourself beaten by death, unable to rise until the Day of Judgment when you have to appear before your Lord. You imagine yourself in the various tribulations of death, as the angel begins to pull your soul out of your feet, suffering tremendous pain therein. Then the angel turns to withdrawing the soul from the entire body, and your soul trickles upward through your body. The throes of death are now over all your body... Then you look at the face of the angel... and see him extending his hand to your mouth, to pull your soul out of your body, and you are overwhelmed by the sight... Then your heart pounds vigorously in suspense as you await the imminent Divine verdict: “Rejoice, you follower of God! You have gained His pleasure and reward” or “Woe to you, enemy of God! You have incurred His anger and punishment.”

When preparations of the dead are completed, and heaven and earth are emptied of their inhabitants who have quietened down after their agitation, nothing is heard and no one is seen except the Supreme Almighty, alone in Grandeur and Majesty, as He has always been. Then your soul is startled by a call to all creatures. You imagine the sound of that voice in your ears and your mind; then you realize that you are being called to appear before the Archangel. So your heart fails and your hair turns grey at the sound of that call. While you are so disturbed, you hear the earth opening above your head, so you jump to your feet, covered with the dust of your grave, staring toward the source of the sound,

with all other creatures roused with you, covered with the dust of the earth upon which they had suffered. You imagine their agitation and terror...You imagine your nakedness and disgrace...your cares and worries amid the crowding creatures, naked, barefooted and all silent in disgrace, fear and horror. You hear nothing but the shuffling of their feet...Sovereignty is stripped from the kings of the earth. They are humbled and disgraced more than any in the crowd, after their tyranny over the servants of God in His land. When the entire population of the earth is gathered together, including humans and jinn, devils and beasts, wild animals, cattle and flies, all in line, ready for judgment, the stars above them are scattered, the sun and the moon are eclipsed and the earth is darkened with the fading of its light. While you and the other creatures are aghast, the sky above spins, and you witness that horror, then it splits asunder, five hundred years deep...And lo! The clash in your ears! Then the sky crumbles into fragments, with the angels waiting on its sides to witness the Lord melting it into liquid silver, turning pale for fear of the Day of Judgment, as described by the Almighty: "It becomes red like ointment" (55:37).

Then the books start to fly right and left, and the scales are set up, and you imagine the scales set upright, while your heart anxiously follows to see where your book settles: on your right or on your left...While you wait with the other creatures you behold the Archangel ordering the myrmidons to step in. They approach with iron shovels and forks...You see them and your heart is overwhelmed with terror. Meanwhile your name is called in the presence of all: where is so-and-so? Imagine yourself shivering with terror...Imagine their grasping your arms in their rough hands as they drag you, gripping you tightly...until you are brought to the throne of the Compassionate, where they hurl you down. The Almighty Himself in His infinite greatness addresses you with His notable words: "Come closer, you son of Adam." You are lost in His light, as you are placed before the great Lord, Majestic and Generous. Your heart is laden with sorrow...and you look like a newborn lamb...How ashamed and frightened you are before the Lord Who has always been kind and protective towards you. So how will you answer when He asks you about your evil deeds and gross crimes?¹⁰

What al-Muḥāsibī recorded is a Muslim scholar's contemplation of the unseen affairs of death and the hereafter. It may be useful to quote a comparable contemplative statement from Sayyid Quṭb who has written extensively about the Day of Resurrection. The following commentary is about the opening verses of *Sūrah al-Takwīr*:

When the sun is darkened; when the stars fall and disperse; when the mountains are made to move away; when camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended; when the wild beasts are brought together; when the seas are set alight; when men's souls are paired (like with like); when the infant girl, buried alive, is asked for what crime she was slain; when the records are laid open; when the sky is stripped bare; when Hell is made to burn fiercely; when Paradise is brought near – every soul shall know what it has put forward. (81:1–14)

These verses sketch a scene of a great upheaval which envelops the whole universe. It is an event which reveals every guarded secret and leaves nothing hidden away. Every human being faces what he has put forward for the day of reckoning and judgement.

The great events mentioned indicate that the present familiar state of the universe, with its perfect harmony, measured movement, controlled relations, perfected by a meticulous and able Maker will suffer a breakdown of its system. It will have completed its role. Along with all creation, it will move into a new predetermined phase of life, unlike anything known to us in this world.

The *surah* aims to get this idea of the inevitable upheaval well established in men's hearts and minds so that they may attach little or no importance to the values and riches of this world, though these may seem to be of lasting consequence. The hearts and minds of people should establish a firm bond with the everlasting truth, i.e. the truth of God the Eternal, Who never changes when everything else changes and disappears. They should break the chains of what is familiar in this life in order to recognize the absolute truth which admits no restrictions of time, place, finite faculties or temporal standards.

As one goes through the events of this universal upheaval, one cannot fail to observe an inner feeling for this affirmation.

As to what exactly happens to all these types of creation during the Resurrection we can only say that it is known to Allah alone. We can only comprehend what we have experienced. When we think of a great upheaval in the world our imagination cannot stretch beyond a violent earthquake or volcano, or, perhaps, the fall of a bomb. Floods are perhaps the most destructive manifestation of the power of water known to us. The most powerful events in the universe we have monitored were some limited explosions in the sun, which is millions of miles away from us. All these events, great as they may be, seem so small when they are compared to that universal upheaval which will take place on the Day of Resurrection that they may be considered akin to children's play. If we really want to know what will happen then, we can do no more than attempt to draw some sort of comparison with what we have experienced in this life.

The darkening of the sun probably means that it will cool down and its flames which stretch out for thousands of miles in space will dwindle and die down. As the sun is now in gas form because of its intense heat, which reaches a maximum of 12,000 degrees, its darkening probably means its transformation by freezing to a form similar to that of the surface of the earth. It may adopt a circular shape without becoming stretched out.

This is probably the meaning of the opening verse, but it could also mean something different. As to how it will happen, or what will cause it to happen, we can only say that this is known only to Allah.

The falling of the stars probably means that they will break away from the system which holds them together and lose their light and brightness. Only Allah knows which stars will be affected by this event: will it affect only a small group of stars, say, our own solar system, or our galaxy, which comprises hundreds of millions of stars, or will it affect all the stars in their millions of millions? It is a well-known fact that the universe comprises an almost infinite number of galaxies, each with its own space.

The forcing away of the mountains probably means that they will be crushed and blown away as indicated in other *surahs*: “*They ask you about the mountains. Say: ‘My Lord will crush them to fine dust and leave them a desolate waste’*” (20:105). “*When the mountains crumble*

away and scatter into fine dust" (56:5). "*And the mountains shall pass away as if they were a mirage*" (78:20). All these verses refer to a certain event which will affect the mountains and do away with their firm foundation and stability. This may be the beginning of the quake which will shake the earth violently, and which is mentioned in surah 99 "The Earthquake". "*When the earth is rocked in her last convulsion, when the earth shakes off her burdens*" (99:1-2). All these events will take place on that very long day.

"*When the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended.*" The Arabic description of the camel here specifies that she is in her tenth month of pregnancy. When in this state, she is to the Arab his most valuable possession because she is about to add to his wealth by a highly valued young camel, and to give him a lot of milk which he and his family will share with the new born animal. However, on that day, which will witness such overwhelming events, such priceless camels will be left without care, completely untended. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by this verse never left such camels untended, except for the gravest of dangers.

"*When the wild beasts are brought together.*" The great terror which overwhelms the wild beasts in their jungles is the cause of their coming together. They forget their mutual enmities, and move together, unaware of their direction. They neither seek their homes nor chase their prey as they usually do. The overwhelming terror changes the character of even the wildest of beasts. What would it do to man?

"*When the seas are set alight.*" The Arabic term used here may mean that the seas will be over-filled with water, from floods similar to those which characterised the early stages of life on earth. On the other hand, earthquakes and volcanoes may remove the barriers now separating the seas so that the water of one will flow into the other. The Arabic expression may also mean that the seas will experience explosions which set them ablaze, as mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'an: "*When the oceans are made to explode*" (82:3). The explosions may result from separating the oxygen and the hydrogen which make the sea water. They could also be atomic explosions of some sort. If the explosion of a limited number of atoms in a hydrogen or atom bomb produces such dreadful consequences as we have seen, then the atomic explosion of the waters

of the oceans, in whatever manner it may occur, will produce something much too fearful for our minds to visualise. Similarly, we cannot conceive the reality of Hell, which stands beyond these vast oceans.

“When men’s souls are paired (like with like).” The pairing of souls may mean the reunion of body and soul at the time of resurrection. It may also mean their grouping, like with like, as mentioned elsewhere in the Qur’an: *“You will be divided into three groups”* (56:7) – the chosen elite, the people of the right, and the people of the left. It may also mean some other way of grouping.¹¹

This should be enough to clarify the importance of contemplation and free meditation on whatever objects throughout the universe, unimpeded by the limitations of time and place in this world or those of the hereafter. Nothing exists in this universe save God the Creator and His creation. Believers are prohibited from contemplating the Divine Being, but they are free to contemplate everything else.