

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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# Individual Levels of Contemplation

Are there different degrees of contemplation and meditation and, if so, is the level of contemplation reached proportionate to the effort made by the contemplator? Are there differences between individuals in this respect? And are some objects easier to contemplate than others? To answer these questions fully is beyond the power of the human mind. Nevertheless, there are at least nine dimensions and variables that seem to interrelate in the formation of these differences. These will now be examined.

### DEPTH OF FAITH

The depth of contemplation and meditation depends, before anything else, on the level of faith of the individuals and their closeness to God. The stronger the faith, the easier it is for them to contemplate God's domain and to invoke thereof the noblest feelings of love and appreciation of their Creator. However, this is a subjective matter, which is known only to God and the believers themselves.

As mentioned earlier, contemplation passes through various stages: the initial perceptual-cognitive stage; the stage of appreciation of the precision and beauty of creation; and the stage when this appreciation is extended to the Creator Himself. Hence, the greater the individual's faith, love and veneration of God, the deeper their contemplation of and meditation on the creation of the heavens and the earth. If believers continue to contemplate and meditate while they are in this warm spiritual and emotional state, they will move from the cold cognitive stage to between the second and third stages, where they can be described as moving between cognition and contemplation. This can lead to an intense emotional state of

ecstasy that may at times be too strong for their psychological system to bear.

One can read curious stories about the genuine contemplation of worshippers. Indeed, a person may start contemplating in a calm state, but then becomes so lost in thought that he or she is unaware of their surroundings. For instance, it is reported by al-Ghazālī in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* that Dāūd al-Ṭā'ī climbed onto the roof of his house on the night of a full moon to contemplate the grandeur of heaven and earth. However, he became so engaged in his meditation, looking at the sky and weeping, that he fell into his neighbor's house. The neighbor jumped out of bed, sword in hand, thinking he was a thief. When he recognized Dāūd, he put down his sword and asked him who had pushed him off his own roof. Dāūd replied: "By God, I was never aware of that."<sup>1</sup>

#### DEPTH AND LENGTH OF CONCENTRATION

The second factor is related to the personality of the believers and their innate ability to concentrate without becoming tired or bored quickly. This quality depends mostly on the nature of the nervous system with which they were granted by the Almighty. A number of experimental research studies were carried out and show clear differences in people's ability to concentrate with patience. Some of these psychological studies were conducted on extroverts and introverts, and showed that the power of concentration has a biological basis in the human nervous system, and that it lies in the reticular formation and activating system. This formation, which is situated at the stem of the brain, acts as a gate controlling the nervous pulses and stimuli which go up to the higher centers of the brain.

In introverts, the reticular formation magnifies the nervous signals sent by the various sense organs to the brain. As a result, these people have a greater ability to concentrate and can do so for a longer period of time. Such individuals are content with the least sensory stimulation in their environment; consequently, they tend to prefer solitude and are introspective. They generally cannot tolerate loud voices or high-pitched music, and do not like very bright colors. They prefer activities

which do not require them to mix with people and participate in exciting activities, such as reading alone, or working in the garden, or in the library. They enjoy their routine work without getting bored, and tend to be careful in planning their life affairs. In their social relations they are reticent, not revealing their secrets except to very few of their closest friends. They rarely show explosive emotions, or react in a hostile, angry, or spontaneous manner. The results of many experiments have confirmed that introverts can do work which demands continuous concentration for long periods, with only a narrow margin of error caused by inhibition and fatigue. We can therefore expect this type of people to be able to engage in deep cognitive activities for a comparatively long time. And if they are also meditative believers, they can engage in deep contemplation on the creation longer and more deeply than other people.

On the other hand, extroverts have a nervous system whose reticular formation inhibits or weakens the nervous signals and stimuli that go to the upper centers of the brain. Consequently, and contrary to the previous type, such people need intense and exciting experiences in their environment to substitute for the inhibition of their nervous reticular formation – at least this is what the supporters of this theory claim. They like public gatherings, and enjoy having a large number of friends, because they are in great need of stimulation, a change of scenery, and constant conversation. They dislike loneliness, are averse to reading, and are impatient with routine activities. They often move house, and change jobs, food, friends, and even spouses. They do not hide their feelings, and they can be violent. They are quick-tempered, but forgive quickly, and they prefer work that does not demand continuous concentration, or is repetitive. Laboratory experiments have also shown that extroverts make more mistakes and that they concentrate less than introverts in various mental and physical activities.<sup>2</sup> If this is true, by virtue of their nervous constitution, these people may be less patient than others when it comes to deep and lengthy thinking and cognitive activities, though their faith and commitment may be similar.

Even if we accept the fact that introverts are on a higher level than extroverts in the sphere of contemplation, this does not automatically

mean that extroverts are of a lower standing. Indeed, by virtue of their nervous and psychological system, they may surpass the introverts in Islamic endeavors that demand mixing with people and making friends or speaking in public. In any case, most people are somewhere between introvert and extrovert, the numbers gradually decreasing toward either extreme.

#### EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL STATE OF THE CONTEMPLATOR

The third factor that affects the depth of contemplation is a psychological one. Indeed, contemplation requires peace of mind and tranquillity, as well as both psychological and physical health. Physical health is without doubt essential for enhancing the depth of contemplation. Indeed, it is obvious that the sick person, the over-eating obese individual, or the one suffering from drug addiction cannot elevate his spiritual status to a high level of contemplation. As I have already discussed the great benefits to physical health from following the Islamic way of life in my book *The AIDS Crisis: An Islamic Socio-Cultural Perspective*, I will devote this section to the influence of the psychological aspects.<sup>3</sup>

The believer who is afflicted with anxiety, depression, obsession, hypochondria or any other psychological disorder cannot be expected to contemplate with a high degree of concentration. Neurotics may be able to meditate on a low level, but those afflicted with psychosis, mental derangement, severe mental retardation or senility may not even be able to do that. Thus, between tranquil normality and severe psychosis there are degrees of psychological and emotional states that affect the ability to contemplate in proportion with the severity of each case.

Undoubtedly, for the contemplative believer, the psychological malady is more of a burden than the physical malady. In fact, many worshippers welcome physical maladies, since they claim that such illnesses may become an opportunity for deeper meditation and contemplation and more spiritually motivated worshipping and remembrance. On the other hand, worry, anxiety, depression and a heavy heart are all enemies to the tranquillity needed by believers in their contemplation: hence, the Prophet's prayer in which he asks God to

protect him from anxiety, sadness, weakness and laziness.<sup>4</sup> We find in our psychiatric and clinical psychological practice that these emotional states from which the Prophet asked God to save him are, in fact, the main symptoms of states of anxiety and depression.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

The fourth factor is the effect of the environment on believers, and concerns how they deal with the needs and problems of everyday life, and the extent to which these needs can impede or enhance their ability to contemplate. For instance, a Muslim man who has a kind and dutiful wife, who teaches Qur'anic interpretation at university several hours a week, and who lives in a country where all the requirements of comfortable living are provided will find that everything in his environment encourages perseverance in contemplation and meditation. In contrast, a believer who has to work for long strenuous hours in some private corporation, spending most of his time in commercial accounting and government tenders, then finishes his tiring work to stand in long queues before bakeries and gas-stations to provide the necessities of living for himself and his dissatisfied family will certainly not find the time or the tranquillity for profound contemplation—even though he may be equal to the other person in his faith, and similar to him in his nervous and psychological disposition.

#### INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

The child-rearing practices of some cultures, whether they are Islamic or not, inculcate in their people, from early childhood, the love and appreciation of natural and artificial artistic beauty. Adults who grew up in such cultures then spend much of their time and money to enjoy and contemplate a picturesque landscape or buy a beautiful painting. On the other hand, there are cultures that bring up their people to be attracted by very little beyond the physical beauty of women and maybe the appreciation of poetry and local music.

It is sad that many of our Muslim societies fit into the second category. I remember very vividly, in the 1930s, seeing English men and

women driving their own cars or hiring taxis or cycling in the hot weather to the White Nile Bridge of Khartoum to watch the sunset. Indeed, the sunset in Khartoum is an extraordinary natural phenomenon. Khartoum marks the spot where the White Nile, with its chalky water, meets the Blue Nile carrying the silt of black soil. The two swift rivers confront each other with a clear dividing line preventing the mixture of the bluish and whitish waters, as though they are a white wrestler and a black wrestler locked in a conflict of equal strength. The sun sets with a deep red-orange hue widely permeating the vastness of the western blue sky which is browned by the dusty desert of Omdurman. These English 'appreciators' were not tourists, but simply settlers colonizing the Sudan. A number of them made a daily excursion to the White Nile Bridge, and I remember how Sudanese onlookers and taxi drivers would wonder at the vain behavior of these Westerners: "What do they see in a setting sun?" and comment ironically "They have so much money that they don't know how to spend wisely!"

In such cultures, the few people who somehow have a talent for appreciating natural beauty and can spend time meditating on it, may often appear rather eccentric to their compatriots. In this connection, the reader may be amused to hear an anecdote about one such refined person, who was a cousin of mine who lived in our little town, Rufa'a, on the Blue Nile. One day, he packed his suitcase to travel to the capital, Khartoum and, as he was waiting for the train, which generally arrives late, he saw a very attractively colored bird, unlike the birds of that part of the Sudan, perched on the telephone line. He was so impressed with its beauty that he followed it as it gracefully flew from one spot on the line to another. When it finally flew away, he came back to where he had been waiting only to find that somebody had stolen his suitcase. Though this incident happened in the 1960s, to this day my relatives in Rufa'a still laugh about it and recall it as evidence for his absorption with 'trivialities'.

Thus one would expect believers who come from a culture that encourages the appreciation of natural beauty to be better contemplators than those coming from cultures that do not bring up their children to admire the aesthetic aspects of life. It is this latter group which the Qur'an addresses when it speaks about the beauty of

God's creation and the different colors and hues in people, animals and rocks.

BELIEVERS' KNOWLEDGE  
OF THE SUBJECTS OF CONTEMPLATION

The sixth factor depends on how far people are acquainted with and have knowledge of the objects of their contemplation, because they will more easily choose and appreciate objects of meditation that are in their familiar surroundings. For instance, whereas I may look at the sky and meditate on its charming beauty, its spaciousness and its twinkling stars, believers who are experts in astronomy will look at the sky and meditate on what their eyes can and cannot see. They see in the scattered sparkling stars billions of flaming suns which hurl their fires into the space beyond; they see millions of constellations that are millions of light-years away, travelling away from one another at formidable speeds of up to 40,000 miles per second. Such scientists look at the sky and truly appreciate that the universe is progressively expanding, and can thus understand the verse of the Qur'an, "We have built the heavens with might and indeed We shall make them wider" (51:47). They also feel the oneness of God in the unity of His creation. They see this unity in the electrons, protons and other sub-atomic particles that constitute the building blocks of everything in this universe. They even see it through the vision of Einstein's theory in which space and time have been united in one physical feature while mass and energy have become two facets of the same electromagnetic phenomenon. Even if we were on the same level of faith, concentration and presence of heart as the astronomers, they would still reach a much higher level of contemplation than ourselves owing to their deeper and wider knowledge.

In the following passage from *The Tao of Physics*, Fritjof Capra describes a deep contemplative experience aided by his knowledge as a physicist:

I was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves rolling in and feeling the rhythm of my breathing, when I suddenly became aware of my whole environment as being engaged in a

gigantic cosmic dance. Being a physicist, I knew that the sand, rocks, water and air around me were made of vibrating molecules and atoms, and that these consisted of particles which interacted with one another by creating and destroying other particles...All this was familiar to me from my research in high-energy physics, but until that moment I had only experienced it through graphs...and mathematical theories. As I sat on that beach, my former experience came to life; I 'saw' cascades of energy coming down from outer space...I 'saw' the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance...I felt its rhythm and I heard its sound.<sup>5</sup>

#### GOOD EXAMPLE AND INFLUENCE OF COMPANIONSHIP

The Prophet said, "A man is the like of his companion, so be careful whom you befriend."<sup>6</sup> The influence of good example and companionship needs no elaboration. Religion has explained it, observations by average people have affirmed it, and modern experimental social psychology has confirmed it, to the extent that it has become a foregone conclusion. In the same way that bad example is a great handicap, good example and companionship make one of the most important factors affecting the profundity of the believer's contemplation. It is for this reason that a disciple or *murīd* can benefit much from his association and identification with a worshipper who has reached the level of the tranquil soul (*al-nafs al-mutma'innah*) in the person of his spiritual master (shaykh). Indeed, the spiritual influence of the companionship of a sage can dramatically change the worldview of his disciple and increase his Islamic meditative ability.

As we have explained earlier, sound contemplation covers all human cognitive and emotional fields, and it becomes deeper and more transcendent with perseverance and when it is combined with the mention and glorification of God, until believers reach a level where they perceive God's power, wisdom, mercy, and all His other qualities in everything they see and hear around them. Describing this state, Ibn al-Qayyim says in *Madārij al-Sālikīn* that the worshipper's deep and continuous contemplation will open for him a divine gate through which he will:

...look up at the Most High and Supreme, as if he can see and behold Him above His heavens, resting on His Throne, observing His creation, hearing their voices, seeing their inner intents. Then the gate of eternity is opened before the worshipper, and through it he sees that all the cosmic changes and affairs of existence are in the hands of the Almighty alone. Then, when he beholds any of the Almighty's creation, it will demonstrate for him the Almighty Creator, His Attributes of perfection and qualities of majesty. None of His creation will veil the worshipper from his Creator. Each element of the creation will address the worshipper, saying: "Listen to my testimony before Him Who created everything in the best mould. I am the work of God, Who created best..." When this happens, the worshipper has nothing of the universe left in his heart except God, the Supreme. The lights of knowledge, truth, sincerity and love then flow from his heart as the light flows from the sun.<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt that this light, which Ibn al-Qayyim likens to sunlight, also flows to anyone who meets such worshippers, befriends them, or becomes their disciple.

#### NATURE OF THE OBJECTS OF CONTEMPLATION

The eighth factor that affects depth of contemplation is the nature of the object of contemplation and meditation. I have already explained the ease with which people can contemplate the natural creation, such as the mountains, the rivers and the forests, in comparison with thinking of human inventions and relating them to the grace of God. The reason for this is that inventions need a greater degree of abstraction than natural things. Moreover, some natural phenomena immediately stimulate thought and strong feelings, shaking the psychological and spiritual aspects of human beings to the core, and imposing themselves on their hearts and minds. For instance, the dazzling flash of lightning, the deafening rumble of thunder, the heavy downpour of rain, or the roaring of the wind – all have a definite impact on the human soul and can easily lead to effortless contemplation connected with fear of God and hope for His mercy. The Qur'an proclaims: "It is He Who shows you the

lightning, by way of both fear and hope. It is He Who raises up the clouds, heavy with fertilizing rain. Thunder repeats His praise and so do the angels with awe..." (13:12-13).

On the other hand, some phenomena are hard to contemplate, either because they are artificial such as human technological inventions or because they are extremely abstract. Because of their hypothetical and conceptual nature, they are beyond the limits of time and place, and it is difficult for the average human mind to visualize or comprehend them. Examples of these phenomena have already been given.

#### FAMILIARITY OF THE OBJECTS OF CONTEMPLATION

Although knowledge and understanding of the objects of contemplation can encourage deeper contemplation, it should not be surprising that the opposite is also true: namely, that extreme familiarity with the object can be a hindrance to contemplating it. Indeed, monotonous repetition drains the greatest cosmic phenomena of their grandeur and splendor. Otherwise, how can we not be moved by the sight of the sunrise every morning, with all the clear majestic signs that it carries? How can our souls not be filled with submissive love for God when we observe and make use of His creations all day long: plants, animals, birds and fish?

It is interesting to quote what Ibn al-Jawzī recorded about this issue of familiarity and novelty. He mentions how, during his long journey to Makkah for the pilgrimage, he was deeply touched by the sight of the huge mountains of the Khaybar, and reproached himself for experiencing such an intense feeling of submissive love and fearful appreciation of the Almighty only after contemplating those mountains. Then he started to remember the great seas, the skies and the stars that he had so often observed but failed to be so deeply moved by. This is how Ibn al-Jawzī described his experience:

On my pilgrimage to Makkah, I was somewhat apprehensive of the Bedouin bandits, so I followed the Khaybar path. I saw such colossal mountains and wondrous paths which were amazing. The greatness of the Creator increased in my heart, the like of which I had never felt

before. I cried to my soul: “Shame on you! Cross to the sea and look at its wonders with the eye of the soul, and you shall witness even greater grandeur. Then observe the universe, and it will seem, in relation to the [seven] heavens and orbits, to be no more than a grain of sand in the desert. Then imagine the orbits and God’s Throne, paradise and hell... Then leave all this and turn back to see that it is all in the grip of the Almighty Whose power knows no limits. After that, turn to yourself to see your beginning and your end. Think of what was before the beginning: it was but nothingness; and of what will be after the end, which is but ashes and dust. How can a person be at ease with this world, when the eye of his soul sees the beginning and the end? How can the sensitive at heart be inattentive to the remembrance of God? Upon my life, if human souls were to turn away from their fancies, they would melt from fear of God or swoon with love for Him. But the senses have been dulled so much that the power of the Creator can be realized only at the sight of a mountain. Yet, had they the wit to realize the true meaning of this, then the Power over that mountain would have been more indicative than the mountain itself.”<sup>8</sup>

The greater our familiarity with our surroundings, the heavier the veil over our vision and awareness, and we fail to observe or remember very important things. In fact, it is possibly this veil of familiarity which has impeded people from contemplating the human being in flesh, blood and soul. Indeed, throughout the ages, people have been able to examine everything around them, and have developed their knowledge in geology, agriculture, chemistry, astronomy, transport, the means of production, the art of war, etc. Yet, though mankind has made great progress in the material and biological studies, human sciences like psychology and sociology are still lagging considerably behind. Although this is to some extent because these social sciences totally disregarded the soul and the spiritual aspects of human beings, it is also because they foolishly mimicked the methodologies used by the physical sciences and that their study began very late in comparison with the physical and biological sciences.

This chapter has so far examined some of the most important factors that can affect depth of contemplation, and thus led to an interactive

discussion of the intellectual, psychological and spiritual aspects of the Muslim believer. The next step is to assess the relative importance of these factors.

Undoubtedly, the importance of any of these factors depends on the circumstances of the contemplators themselves. In some cases, contemplation deepens considerably if believers are in a better psychological and emotional state. In other cases, Muslims will find it easier to meditate constantly if they move away from the noisy city to a remote and quiet village. Nevertheless, the basic factor in the depth of contemplation is that of faith. Depth of faith and nearness to God are the backbone of contemplation; the other elements are secondary factors that derive their influence from the strength of that faith. Modern scholars, particularly those designated as the neo-Mu‘tazilites, are far from the truth when they claim that we are nowadays more capable than our forefathers – even than the Companions of the Prophet – to contemplate God’s creation simply because we know more about the nature of things as a result of the great advances achieved in modern science and technology. Indeed, the real effect of what believers see and feel in their environment depends much more on the depth of their faith and their submissive love of God than on what they know and discover about the nature of things. Contemplation is a warm emotional state where believers are affected by what they feel and grasp of the precision and beauty in God’s vast universe; it is not a cold fact-finding state enhanced by the increase of knowledge.

A conceptual, though simplistic, illustration can be given if one imagines that these parameters are measurable by identical units that increase or decrease according to the circumstances of the contemplating Muslim. If we give the Faith factor the symbol ‘F’, the ability to Concentrate the symbol ‘C’, the believer’s Knowledge of the object under contemplation the symbol ‘K’, the Qualities of the object under contemplation the symbol ‘Q’, and so on, then the depth of contemplation will depend on the influence of the Faith factor ‘F’ on each of the other parameters. This may be put in a simplistic equation as follows:

$$\text{Depth of Contemplation} = F (C+K+Q+\dots)$$

This equation shows that an increase in the faith factor will lead to a multiplication in the depth of contemplation, for it interacts with all the other factors. However, when the other factors increase, they will have only a limited additive effect on the depth of contemplation, which is like the difference between adding figures and multiplying them. Similarly, when the faith factor 'F' falls to zero, which corresponds to total disbelief, the other factors will be worthless, no matter how large in size, because the result of multiplying any figure by zero is no more than zero. Therefore, those who have a degree of faith like that of the Companions of the Prophet will need little knowledge of what they see in their environment and much less time in order to achieve depths of contemplation that are far beyond the reach of weaker people. In figures, if a Muslim has a weak faith of 10 units but has extensive knowledge about the object of his contemplation, has all the time and peace of mind he needs, and other factors, which add up to 100, then his depth of contemplation will be 1,000 units. However, someone who has much less knowledge and less time may secure only half the units of contemplation, that is 50, but since he possesses a high faith factor of 100 units, his depth of contemplation will reach 5,000 – namely, five times as much as the former! Naturally, spiritual and religious concepts such as faith and contemplation cannot be subjected to such simple and superficial measurements and equations – it is a mere notion that seemed interesting to share with readers in order to clarify the point that was being made.

I hope that readers who wish to improve their practice of this great form of worship and achieve deeper contemplation will benefit from the explanations given. They can explore their positive natural God-given abilities and their beneficial environmental and spiritual endowments in order to make full use of them in expanding the realm of their contemplation until it is deeply and habitually inculcated in their psychological and spiritual entity. They should also try to discover the factors and habits that deter them from contemplation in order to avoid them. If people are sincere and highly motivated, they will surely be guided to surmount all the obstacles to worshipping the Almighty and contemplating His creation. There is always a creative and unforeseen solution to chronic problems.

For example, a very busy friend of mine who used to complain of lack of time for meditation and remembrance of God suddenly discovered that he lost two hours every day in driving to and from work. Realizing this, and choosing to use the time he spent in his car to contemplate and remember God, not only enabled him to use his time more efficiently, but it also took away all the anxieties and tensions of a long drive and the provocation of road-bullies.

Although this chapter has examined the most important factors leading to individual differences among believers, it is obvious that each believer has his or her own circumstances and individual life experiences which have their own bearing on the entire process of contemplation.