

Life and Death An Islamic Perspective

In The Name of Allah The Beneficent, The Merciful

Salamun alaykum !

From the time you are born, whether prince or pauper, the one absolute certainty, irrespective of faith or station, is that you will die. Every breath is a breath closer to death. 'Life' begins with death. For death was created before life itself.

Life in this world started with death and not with life. According to our logic it should have started with life. The beginning of creation – as we understand it – is life. By relying on this concept we do not then understand the meaning of life.

People understand the meaning of life as the time during which man exists, and death as nonexistence or nothingness, whereas the truth is otherwise.

Allah, all praise and glory is to Him, says in the Holy Quran:

He, who created death and life to test you [to see] which of you is best in conduct – and He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving [Al-Mulk , 67: 2]

Thus, death is not nonexistence, but one of the creations of Allah just as life. Allah, all praise and glory is to Him, created death just as He created life. Both are the creations of Allah. Each is governed by its own rules, its time of occurrence and its events. Only Allah, all praise and glory is to Him, is The One Able to transfer His creatures from the world of death to that of life, or from the world of life to that of death.

The Soul Neither Enters The Body Nor Gets Out Of It

It must be understood that the relation between the soul and the body is not by way of Hulool (penetrative migration). It is not like the entrance of water in a utensil or of air in vacuum. It also cannot be said that it remains out of body or it goes out of it at the time of death because soul is essence, not matter. There is no question of its entering or vacating. The only thing is that its relation with body is such that it remains fully attentive to the body **Death disconnects this relation.**

It is also obligatory for us to believe that death occurs by the command of God. The same Power which had, established this relation in the womb of mother at the last moment of the worldly life, disconnects this relation between the body and soul. Only He is the bestower of life and of death. The Holy Quran says: “God gives life and only God causes death also.” (S. Zumar, V: 42)

The Qur’an tells us, the purpose of creating human beings is given as ‘worship’. [2 The Qur’an, 51:56] This may seem to us too difficult to understand. Of what use is worship for God? It does not benefit Him. Of what use is it to man? But this point has been explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an as the purpose of Creation. Contrary to the view that the next life is subsidiary to this one, the Qur’an says: “If there were no Resurrection, Creation would be futile.” And again it says: “Do you suppose that we have created you in vain?” [The Qur’an, 23:115] It is suggestive of something wisely done.

Allah does nothing in vain, and all is rightful and not in play, and there is a return to Him who accounts for the whole universe. We never come across the idea in the Qur’an that man is created in order to know more and act more to attain his goal. He is created to worship, and the worship of God is in itself a goal.

Thus the goal and ideal that Islam offers is God, and everything else is preparatory to it. In the verses where the Qur’an mentions perfect human beings, or speaks on their behalf, it says they have truly understood the goal of life and endeavoured to attain it. The Quran quotes the prophet Abraham : “My prayer, worship, life and death are for God, who is the Lord of the Universe . “ [The Qur’an, 6:163]

Thus, in Islam everything revolves round the axis of God.

The purpose of life therefore is to attain God-Consciousness, God-Awareness.

According to the Qur’an, man gains his happiness only from God, and it is He who fills all the gaps in his life, and satisfies him. The Qur’an says: “Those who have faith and their hearts are tranquil in thinking of God, know that all hearts find peace by remembering God.” [The Qur’an: 13:28] Only God brings repose to the anxious and inquisitive hearts of man. Other things are subsidiary and preliminary matters,

not the final stage. The same is said of worship: “To remember God, pray.” [The Qur’an: 20:14]

The present life is a preparatory stage for an eternal life through the spiritual understanding of life. The spiritual understanding of life and moral sense of life are the two principles that are the foundation of the moral order that Islam lays down for humankind. This criterion is the satisfaction, pleasure of God, be He exalted. The satisfaction or pleasure of God that Islam lays as the general criterion in life which steers the human ship to the shore of righteousness, goodness and justice, taking into consideration both the individual and society securing a balance between both.

The human body is the vehicle of the soul to achieve this objective, the final goal being the Pleasure of God and the return to His Grace and Mercy, to be deserving of an eternal life in that Grace and Mercy.

The soul is but a Trustee of this body, accountable for every thought and deed, for the body as God’s creation like all of creation in the Universes is created in perpetual harmony of God’s law and is in perpetual Glorification of the Creator. It is only the free will granted to the soul that leads us to either follow the path shown us by God to achieve our goal or divert ourselves away from it.

Life in this world is temporary abode. Yet it is of critical importance. Our lives can be divided into three parts: Our relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves and our relationship with others. Each of these relationships has a right on us and a duty towards it.

It is the right of the Creator to know Him and love Him. It is His right to be worshipped, to accept and submit ourselves to His WILL.

It is the right of us, body and soul, to be nourished and not be abused, to realise our full potential towards the goal, to use it otherwise would be in violation of God’s law.

It is the right of our fellow humankind and the right of all the creatures on earth that we do them justice with compassion and love, thereby helping them reach the same goal as ourselves, The Grace and Mercy of God in an everlasting life.

In the words of Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) [The Nahj ul Balaghah, Wisdom 229:] “Some worship God for the sake of their desires, and that is a merchants’ worship; some worship out of fear, and that is a slaves’ worship; and some worship out of gratitude and that is the worship of the noble,”

Again, in another saying, Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) is even more explicit: “O God, I do not worship you for fear of your Fire or for cupidity in desiring heaven; I worship you because you are worthy of it.”

The remembrance of God by way of ritual prayer and supplications is one way of worship. Fulfilling the rights on ourselves and humankind is also worship. Fasting and charity, doing good, and leading a virtuous life is worship.

Fulfilling the right of our parents, especially the mother*, is worship. The rights of our children, our kith and kin, our neighbours, our teachers, our friends and adversaries, our society, all have rights on us. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enumerate them all. Suffice it to say that we have been guided through prophetic messages and immaculate guides sent to every nation and people, through every age and day, towards our goal. That is the requirement of Justice and Mercy. For God is Just and Merciful.

Having thus lived within the bounds of God’s law and fulfilled the rights of others and his duties man approaches death. “For nothing is closer to man than death” (Ali ibn Abu Talib a.s.)

He sees and hears the call of the angel of death, Israeel.

If in his life time man has fulfilled his required duties, avoided forbidden deeds, and possessed ethical values and these are in his unblemished records then let him not fear death.

If man has taken account of the value his days, his nights, his hours and minutes he will never be frightened of death.

For the soul of this man will disconnect like a silk cloth taken away swiftly from a smooth surface. If he has lived otherwise, then picture that fragile silk cloth being ripped away over a bed of thorns.

The soul is in another dimension and can see us and hear us but we cannot see it or hear it. The doors of faith and belief are shut forever but the doors of deeds are still open. For every result of good that he did will continue to be written to his account. Every blessing and prayer sent his way will add weight to elevate his status in the Hereafter.

The body is prepared for burial, washed and shrouded and lowered into the grave.

The soul will be in a condition or dimension called Barzakh, a veil, an abode of waiting till the day of Resurrection. In that state he will either see the Joy, Grace and Mercy that awaits him or the tortures of the Fires of Hell.

There are many Quranic verses showing that after a man dies his companion will be his deeds, that is, the result of the deeds done by him in the world.

Here we suffice with only one verse / ayat:

Almighty Allah says: O Messenger! Remember the Day when every person will see his good deeds before him. Similarly he will also face his bad and evil deeds and will wish that he may be distanced from them. But those evil deeds will not go away from him and O People! Your Lord warns you of His anger and wrath. And God is always kind to His servants. (Surah Aale Imran: 3)

It is God's Mercy that He has conveyed innumerable admonitions and warnings to mankind through His Messengers.

The Day of Resurrection will be a day when a loud Trumpet shall sound and all mankind that perished will be brought back to life. Several verses in the Quran mention this in clear terms. The incredulous Arabs even asked how rotten bones will come back to life. The Quran says that all humankind whether buried, burnt or eaten by animals or drowned in the oceans will be Resurrected by the Command of God.

Each soul shall receive it's just reward or punishment "So whosoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whosoever does an atom' weight of evil will see it" (Quran 99:7,8)

Eternal life in an abode is described in detail, some would claim metaphorically. The body and soul united in a form that we do not know or understand in ageless beauty living in bliss with everything that the heart would desire. Imagine, the reaction of a desert Arab when told that Heaven had rivers flowing and green clothing of soft silk and fruits and food and drink of every kind that the heart would desire. The sheer joy and happiness at the thought !

And the image of tortures of an Everlasting Fire, eternal heat and thirst would indeed be Hell if you had experienced a fraction of it in the deserts.

Yet the real torture the real punishment would be separation from the Grace and Mercy of God. In his supplication taught to Kumail Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (a.s.) says;

“ supposeO my God, my Master, my Protector, my Lord that I am able to endure Thy chastisement, how can I endure separation from Thee. And suppose that I am able to endure the heat of Thy Fire, how will I endure not gazing on Thy generosity.....”

“And do not call those who were slain in Allah’s way (i.e. in faith and testimony) ‘dead’ Rather they are living.....”

In conclusion I quote the Quran : “ Verily we belong to Allah and to Him do we indeed return” (Quran: Sura Bakrah 2)

“.. Therefore glory be to Him in whose hand is the kingdom of all things and to Him you shall be brought back.”

And finally as all things created but die even death shall be annihilated.

“ ... Everyone on it is ephermeral,

And there will endure forever the Face of your Lord, the Lord of majesty and glory”
(Quran: 55: 26-27)

References and sources:

1. The Holy Quran – translations by Shakir; Ali Quli ; Mir Ahmedali
2. Nahjul Blagha (Peak of Eloquence) – Imam Ali Ibn Abu Talib (a.s.)
3. Day of Resurrection : Muhammed Mitwaly Ash-Sha'rawy
4. The Hereafter- Ma'ad : Ayatollah Dastghaib Shirazi
5. Goal of Life : Ayatullao Murtada Motahhari
6. Man and Universe : Ayatullao Murtada Motahhari
7. Our Philosophy : Allama Muhammed Baqir as-Sadr

I quote here Allama Iqbal :

Khudi ko kar buland itna, ke har Takdeer se pehle

Khuda Bandese khud pooche: “Bata teri Reza kya hai?”

In loose translation: Elevate yourself to such heights that before each destiny,

God Himself would ask His servant : “What is thy wish ?”

* (“Under the feet of the mother lies Heaven”)