Anxiety, Meditation & Islam

Anxiety has been increasingly ubiquitous since the dawn of the pandemic. Many of us has been struggling with the various challenges that this pandemic has triggered. Some of these challenges illuminate and reveal existing tensions within ourselves, our spirituality, our chosen lifestyles, and our relationships; while other challenges were a direct effect of the repercussions of the pandemic, such as employment, education, health, and isolation.

Although the severity of the pandemic has seemingly peaked in Brisbane, its consequences persist in one way or another. Covid-19 has almost been marked as an era, marking life before and after the nation's lockdown, and rightly so. Things *have* changed: perspectives, knowledge, routines, relationships, work, study, technology, more so for some than others. And life may continue to change from this point henceforth.

The micro, and macro impacts of the pandemic, and the scale of uncertainties that comes with it, provoke our anxieties. For those who have underlying anxieties, the concerns become more profound or may manifest in other ways. Those who were not struggling with prominent anxieties prior to the pandemic, may have noticed that they have developed some. Thus, as a race, we continue to anticipate changes and balance that with our faith, our relations, and ourselves.

Striking that balance can be a challenging art in an evolving circumstance, and this is where spirituality and mental health meet. Unfortunately, there is a stigma around admitting psychological distress amongst Muslims. Acknowledging that one is mentally struggling, whether to oneself or others, is framed as a judgment. The judgment that when one suffers emotionally or psychologically, one's *Imaan* is questionable. However, this judgment escapes the nature of life and the mind. It does not consider that life presents with ups and downs, and that humans are responsive to their environment. This responsivity is a built-in mechanism for all living things.

Acknowledging that the constancy in life itself is *in* change, helps us normalize that our anxieties and internal struggles are not only valid, but also natural. This allows us to

relinquish judgment, taking our worries back to our *Imaan,* whereby we can give attention to our position in life, and our relationship with spirituality. By doing so, we can further introspect into our tensions, and assess whether we need external support or not.

The practice of meditation pervades humanity, and is omnipresent in the teachings of Islam. Health professionals and psychologists have been fascinated with this ancient practice and phenomenon in the past two decades, using it as interventions for stress, concentration, emotional regulation, improving relationships, addictions, and so on.

It leads us to insight within ourselves and life around us, it helps us notice, observe, and learn. When anxious, meditation is about the honest acceptance of the distress, and awareness of these changes. Bearing that insight into oneself actually *requires* the *Imaan*.

The virtue of mindfulness extends through Islam, whereby practices inculcate the application of one's *Imaan*. Some forms of meditation in Islam includes, *Salah, Dhikr, Muraqabah*, and *Tafakkur*. The mindfulness involved in these practices awakens a form of metacognition[1], whereby we enlighten ourselves with the ruminations of our mind and our heart.

By slowing down our mind, and reigning its attention to the present, and into the self, we would have some sense of the extent we can re-navigate ourselves, and whether we can benefit from external support. We can learn to sit with uncertainty, and to explore them in a spiritual way. Through meditation, we give ourselves the gift of opportunity to explore our spirituality further.

At risk of minimizing the catastrophic effects of the pandemic, it has somehow presented us with the opportunity for wisdom: for the remembrance of Allah, for devotion and remembrance in seclusion (something we have not been blessed with achieving often in today's society), for contemplation, and for self-reflection[2].

Ibn Al-Qayyim discussed the various meanings of meditation in Islam, addressing meditation as a key part of aligning our perspectives, and in our preparation for *Akhirah*:

reflecting (*tafakkur*), remembering (*tadhakkur*), examining (*nathr*), meditating (*ta'amul*), contemplating (*i'tibar*), deliberating (*tadabbur*), and pondering (*istibsar*)." These words consider the different forms of meditation activity, and also hint their overlap. He says,

"It is called 'reflection' because in that is the utilization of thought and its procurement during it.

It is called 'remembrance' because it is the fetching of knowledge which must be considered after being distracted or absent from it…

It is called 'meditation' because it is repeatedly examining again and again until it becomes evident and uncovered in one's heart. It is called 'contemplation'—taking lessons—because one takes a lesson from it to apply elsewhere…

It is called 'deliberation' because it is examining the conclusion of matters, their endings and consequences, and deliberating on them."[3]

I personally am humbled by the challenges I have faced, and continue to face during this time. It took me time to realign myself with my mediation practices because there was so much to adapt to, so quickly in the *Duniya*. I found some novelty in having to re-navigate my life. However, I was also handed numerous grievances that have rocked me at the core. I experienced a bereavement from afar, major challenges with my research, financial instabilities, health concerns, as well as familial tensions. I began to see my anxieties manifesting in preparing ridiculously lavish dishes for *Iftar* during Ramadhan. I found that my grief led me to question the purpose of my research. I began doubting my ability in doing everything I am passionate about. I lost my self-confidence. I even doubted the future of my relationship with my partner. Although I was still practicing my daily self-care, there was a tumultuous domino-effect bubbling beneath.

This was when I realized I had the one-in-a-lifetime opportunity to practice meditation. I decided to re-organize my mind, and reconnect with my spirituality. I feel blessed to be able to say that it has been a satisfyingly intimate learning experience. I took myself to learn about the different paths of Islamic meditation. Initially, it felt like a daily

chore. However, I noticed that it became more of joy, something I looked forward to everyday. Something I would plan for:

> "What type of meditation did I want to try today?
>
> *Dhikr?* Which *Dhikr?* With breathwork*? Or Muraqabah?*
>
> Where would I do it?
>
> Park? In my 'Zen Den'? In the backyard?
>
> When?
>
> Sunrise? Sunset? After my exercise? Whilst waiting for my partner to finish vacuuming?"

I realized this happened when I took the pressures of meditation away (because they were anxieties themselves, a paradox in action). I also came to realize that I could not manage my bereavement alone, and thus reached out to close friends, and my former psychologist. Interestingly, working through bereavement with a *secular* mental health professional reinforced me towards acceptance of *Qadha* and *Qadar* (fate and divine decree), thus strengthening my faith further. It also gave me the drive to reach out to fellow Muslims in Brisbane, and thus landed me contributing to CCN.

The lesson I have learnt, is that we can fall back on our *Imaan* through meditation, to find deficits in ourselves, in order to further strengthen our *Imaan*. However, for some of us it may be more beneficial to approach a mental health professional with a cross-cultural Islamic background. The fact that such professionals exist in the Australian demographic is heartening. It gives us hope that we can reconcile our beliefs within the practicalities of the secular world. However, I urge readers to recognize that removing the barrier between spirituality and mental health is a two-way road; the more we adhere to the stigma of seeking help for our mental and emotional distresses, the less likely will Muslims be able to help each other. And so, I encourage you to rise above the stigmatized norms, and reach out for the support you need, in reflection of your guiding faith.

I shall close with an honest and eloquent poem by Rumi on anxiety and mediation:

The Guest House

"This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.

Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond. [4]*"*

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[1] Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Miftāḥ Dār Al-Sa'āda*h, 1:182.

[2] "How to be a mindful Muslim: An exercise in Islamic meditation," https://yaqeeninstitute.org/justin-parrott/how-to-be-a-mindful-muslim-an-exercise-in-islamic-meditation/

[3] Schmidt, Carol, et al. *Meditation focused on self-observation of the body impairs metacognitive efficiency*, (Consciousness and Cognition, 2019), 70. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1053810018302447

[4] Barks, C. *The Essential Rumi*, *New Expanded Edition.* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).