

Your Purpose in
Life

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The purpose of Life

There are some times when we are deep into the exhaustive demands of daily life that we need to pause for reconsideration. How well, to our plans, are we achieving our preset goals? Have we deviated from our original targets and set for ourselves more demanding challenges? When (or if) we accomplish our present desires, what next? Is life supposed to be a journey of ceaseless effort? Is our physical endurance a match for our boundless ambitions and, if not, are we heading towards demoralisation or self-destruction?

To help us in the quest for the purpose of life, we must take a few moments for contemplation. We need to temporarily isolate ourselves from the enslaving routines of daily life that deprive us of the opportunity to seek the truth. A few moments of reconsideration may save us many years of aimless effort.

Let us start from basics. All humans are different to one another in terms of their achievements eg. age, education, occupation, wealth, marriage, children, etc. However, it is noteworthy that not one of these achievements is common to every person. Some people remain illiterate while others, due to illness or other reasons, are unable to take up jobs. There are many that never marry and yet, from the married, not all bear children. Some die when young while others reach dignified old age.

If we look at the common events of all beings, we will come closer to appreciating the universal trend of man. Still looking at basics, can we point to a single event (or achievement) that greets every human being after birth and which is common to all? The only thing that comes to mind is the inevitable end of all people. Therefore, when birth is the common start of man on entry into this world, death is one's common end on exit from it.

We are developed from the humble origin of a sperm. The embryo, nourished in the womb, undergoes many delicate and complex stages. The gentlest imbalance in the development process of the foetus can result in its extinction. Yet, the intricate mechanism of the mother is designed with extreme precision and for purposeful protection. Why then must man, who is developed with outstanding deliberation, be destroyed with apparently much less effort? After all the elaborate work undergone in sustaining life in its preliminary stages, it seems strange that this life is destined to end at a later point in time.

In the short course of life, we take advantage of our surroundings. Everything in existence appears to be designed for our protection and benefit. The ozone layer prevents harmful rays from damaging life on Earth. We exploit the riches of the land (for oil, metals and crop) and sea (fishing and minerals) to satisfy our needs. Benefit is also obtained from the universe beyond Earth, such that the moon's gravity keeps our planet stable and the sun is essential for our very existence.

Significant progress in continually being made in scientific and technological fields. Medical cures are now possible for previously fatal health conditions. Why then must our achievements be interrupted and life terminated without choice or warning?

It becomes clear after some thought that death is as meaningless as life itself - unless each serves a genuine purpose. The intellect of man calls for careful reasoning. Birth and death are two tremendous events in a person's lifetime. When standing alone, neither serves any purpose. Common sense does not accept that birth is simply meant to be the start to death; nor is death the supposed end to birth. However, the purpose can only fit between birth and death. This is life itself! Therefore, to understand the reason behind our existence, we need to appreciate the purpose of our limited lifespan on Earth.

To have a purpose in life, man must be availed clear instructions that he must heed for personal success. It is only sensible to deduce that such instructions cannot be devised by man to be followed by himself. Just as man-made products are accompanied with detailed instructions for their correct operation, man's existence also requires precise instructions for one's efficient functionality. These instructions must be supplied by the Maker of man who is also responsible for the perfect functioning of the Earth, its inhabitants and the rest of the universe.

It is true to say that the authority most qualified to provide instructions regarding a product is its manufacturer. Once the instructions are made available, any malfunction due to improper use of that product cannot be blamed upon its maker. As it is the responsibility of the Creator to provide us with instructions for our intended function, we have an obligation towards ourselves in identifying these instructions and practising them. These instructions manifest our purpose in life.

Submission to the Creator

Everything that is in existence, from the smallest part of an atom to the largest body in the universe, follows a precise code of law. We only need to consider the Earth with its relation to the Sun and other heavenly bodies to marvel at the perfection of this law. This is a detailed and complex system, which maintains the harmony of the various planets, each positioned in its own orbit and retaining its individual characteristics.

Coming down to Earth, we need to give some thought to all that surrounds us. Plants, insects, animals, birds and the creatures in the sea are but few examples of life that we pass by without giving ample consideration. Photosynthesis in plants and the breathing mechanism of creatures on land and in the sea emphasise upon the elaborate design attributed to everything in existence.

When carefully studying the pattern of all that surrounds us on Earth and that which stretches beyond the boundaries of our planet, there is one obvious fact that is common to all: the total submission of every individual body to the laws that govern it. This submission to the laws of its Creator is called Islam!

Islam therefore means 'submission to the will of God'. It is thus the practice of all things in existence. Whether humans or animals, birds or insects, our planet or the rest of the universe - all submit to the will of the Creator.

Concept of Islam

God's Message of Islam remains consistent with all His creations. Prophets were righteous people chosen to deliver this Message to all nations of the world. Thus, the messengers of God were given a common task. All prophets, from Adam to Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them all), spread the teachings of Islam: submission to the will of God.

When we appreciate the Message of Islam in its true light, the concept of 'Christianity' and 'Muhammadanism' becomes clearly misleading. This concept is strongly refuted in Islam. The Message of God cannot be referred to an individual person but must only be associated with God Himself. Neither Christ nor Muhammad (peace be upon them) was the founder of new disciplines. Their teachings were not self-inspired and therefore must not be attributed to them personally.

Prophet Abraham was blessed with two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Some of the descendants of Isaac were great prophets such as Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them all). From Abraham's son, Ishmael, Muhammad (peace be upon him) descended as the last prophet of God. Abraham, his descendants and all the preceding prophets were appointed to teach a common Message that is ordained by a common God: the Message of Islam - submission to the will of God.

Humans in Islam

Unlike the rest of creation, man has been granted with the option of submitting to God's will. He can either obey the laws of his Creator or he may choose to disobey.

Other creations are deprived of this choice. The Earth, for instance, cannot simply decide to change its course of motion around the Sun and turn in the opposite direction. Neither can the Moon opt to abandon its orbit around the Earth and encircle another planet instead. Apart from man, the entire universe submits itself unquestionably to the preset laws that govern it.

Man has been given a significant role in life. He is enjoined to follow the laws prescribed to him by his Creator and to help others to see the light of this natural submission. However, even though presented with this unique role, he may exercise his free will to disregard his responsibilities.

When a man decides to turn away from his role in life, he does so without causing similar disobedience on the role of other creations. His body, for instance, continues to function in accordance to the laws set for it by the Creator. The heart continues to pump blood and supply oxygen to all parts of the body. The eyes and ears continue to receive images and signals that are subsequently translated by the brain into meaningful data for the human's benefit. The man, even when choosing to disobey the laws of God, can still enjoy the virtues of sight and hearing because his physical body continues to submit itself to the will of its Creator.

Muhammad and the Ka'ba

God chose His last prophet to be born in Makkah, in the year 570 AD. When Arabia was sunk in the darkness of ignorance and corruption, Muhammad (peace be upon him) appeared as a gift of guidance for all mankind. Raised in the respected tribe of Quraish, he was widely known for his truthfulness, righteousness and generosity.

The Quraish were the custodians of the Ka'ba. This is the place of worship that God commanded Abraham and Ishmael to build thousands of years ago. The building, constructed of stone, was destined to become the pride of Makkah. Finally, God commanded Abraham to summon mankind to visit this sacred place for worship.

As the years passed by, the worshippers strayed away from the true teachings of Islam and consequently began to associate partners with God. Although built to attract worshippers to the One Creator, the Ka'ba sadly became the home of at least 360 different man-made idols that were revered as gods.

Muhammad (peace be upon him) grew up in a sea of idolaters. His divine task was to call mankind back to worship the One true God. The original Message, of submitting to the will of God and carried by all prophets before him, was burdened upon the last messenger who was now reintroducing Islam as if it was a new concept.

Allah and Gabriel

The Creator of mankind and of the entire creation has chosen for Himself a unique name: Allah. This is the name that is used to call upon God for help, mercy and guidance.

A number of special attributes are formally associated with Allah such as 'Most Gracious', 'Most Merciful' and 'Most Forgiving'. These attributes may also be used as names to call upon God, each attribute describing a divine superlative.

When mankind is given the freedom of choice to either obey or disobey the will of the Creator, Allah has long clarified His Message of Islam. This Message was normally not conveyed directly from Allah to His messengers. A special angel was delegated with the responsibility of delivering these Words of divine guidance. Archangel Gabriel (peace be upon him) was appointed with this role to all the prophets.

The Quran

Allah had sent His Word of guidance to all nations of the world through thousands of prophets. Each of the prophets was assigned the responsibility of addressing a particular nation. The Message of submission addressed the specific requirements of that nation. These requirements differed from one nation to the other and hence each prophet was sent with a code of law that addressed the needs of his people.

As Muhammad (peace be upon him) was destined to be the last prophet of Allah, he was to present a code of divine law that suited the varying needs of all mankind and for all time. To be able to achieve this, the universal Message must somehow be protected from extinction or deformation, as were the teachings of the prophets before him.

The teachings of Allah, brought through the last messenger, covers all aspects of social, political and spiritual spheres. Science enjoys a key role in informing man of facts within himself, on Earth and in outer space. The revelations are meant to serve as references for guidance and a source of knowledge.

These teachings were delivered over a period of twenty three years by angel Gabriel to Muhammad (peace be upon them) who, in turn, instructed the scribes to record them in their revealed form. This forms the book of guidance for all mankind: the holy Quran.

The Quran records Allah's eternal Words in chapter (called Surat in the Quran) 5, verse 3: ***This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.*** (Surat 5:3)

In the Quran, Allah mentions many of His previous prophets. Outstanding servants of Allah like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Solomon, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them all), who dedicated their lives towards spreading the Message of submission to their people. Because of the common theme of their instructions, Islam makes it an article of faith to believe in all the prophets of Allah.

The Quran that is available in all corners of the world today is identical to the revelations that were narrated by the prophet in Arabia, word for word. This is unlike all other revelations to previous prophets, which were either not recorded during the lifetime of the prophet or were substantially changed or lost with the passage of time. The text of the Quran has remained unaltered hundreds of years after its revelation. To confirm this living miracle, Allah promises in His final revelation that He has taken the responsibility of preserving the holy Quran. Allah says (Surat 15:9): ***We have, without doubt, sent down the Message, and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption).***

This promise has stood the test of time. Ever since the Quran's revelation, many thousands of Muslims have memorised all **114** chapters in their original text. This method of preservation has proved to be the most reliable guard against alteration.

Muslims and Prophethood

Through His Message to man, the holy Quran, Allah has provided a clear and lasting guidance for submission to His will. When a man takes upon himself this natural function in life and enjoins the teachings of his Creator, he has chosen for himself a life of obedience to Allah. In other words, he has embraced the original purpose for which he was created: the privilege of submission. Having taken up this role, he is called a Muslim.

A Muslim, therefore, is one who takes on the natural role of Islam (or submission to the Creator). In short, he accepts that there is no god to be worshipped other than Allah (the One and true God) and that prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is His messenger. Once a Muslim testifies his obedience to Allah, he can only submit to the guidance of His last revelation: the holy Quran.

In his historic sermon, to an audience of many thousands of Muslims, prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) advised that "*the present must inform those who are absent*". Thus, the responsibility of prophets was thrust upon the shoulders of every Muslim. It is therefore little wonder that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was chosen as the last prophet of Allah. Not only has he delivered the final Word but, after him, every Muslim can convey the Message of the Quran - the intended source of divine guidance.

The pillars of Islam

Islam is supported by five pillars of practice that collectively radiate the intended nature of its followers.

The first pillar concentrates upon declaring the faith with which one submits to the will of the Creator. To enter into the fold of submission, a person needs to declare his/her commitment to worship Allah (without associating any partners or intermediaries to Him) and to accept Muhammad (peace be upon him) as His messenger. In Arabic, this declaration is called the Shahaadah.

Having submitted oneself to Allah, the Muslim is required to believe in the articles of Islamic faith. These are as follows:

- Tawheed: faith in the unity of Allah (ie. apart from Allah, none deserve worship).
- Belief in the existence of Allah's angels.
- Belief in the Books of Allah (ie. Messages that Allah sent down to mankind through his prophets) eg. the Zaboor (Psalms) of David, Torah of Moses and the Injeel (Gospel) of Jesus.
- Belief in all the messengers of Allah.
- Belief in the Day of Judgement when all will be justly recompensed for their deeds.
- Belief in the perfect knowledge and ability of Allah to execute His plans and recognising that nothing could happen in His Kingdom against His will.

Allah explains that we cannot relate His unique characteristics to any of His creations. Therefore, Islam strictly discourages portraying His image to resemble that of a man or an angel (as conceived by human mind). Allah teaches us (Surat 112:1 to 4): ***Say: He is Allah, the One; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begets not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like Him.***

Next comes the role of performing the daily prayers. The five obligatory prayers are spread over the morning and night: at dawn, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset and nightfall. All Muslims face the holy Ka'ba during prayers, thus signifying their unity in faith and revering the original spot of worship that was chosen by Allah. Every prayer is preceded by the Adaan. This is the call made to summon the Muslims to prayer. The call is made in Arabic and translates as follows:

Allah is Most Great. Allah is Most Great.

Allah is Most Great. Allah is Most Great.

I testify that there is no god except Allah. I testify that there is no god except Allah.

I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.

Come to prayer. Come to prayer.

Come to success (in this world and the hereafter). Come to success.

Allah is Most Great. Allah is Most Great.

There is no god except Allah.

We are taught that the sincere performance of prayer is a sign of righteousness (Surat 31:2 to 5): ***These are verses of the Wise Book - A Guide and a Mercy to the Doers of Good - Those who establish regular Prayer, and give Zakaat and have sure faith in the Hereafter. These are on (true) guidance from their Lord; and these are the ones who will prosper.***

The third pillar of Islam, called Zakaat, emphasises upon the duty towards helping the needy. Allah is the Creator of all things and He is also the Provider for His creations. As everything belongs to Him, wealth is a provision upon humans to be held in trust. Zakaat is an Arabic word that means both 'purification' and 'growth'. Our wealth is purified by giving to those in need and, like the pruning of plants, this good-willed cut balances and encourages new growth.

There is another form of charity that is voluntary. This is called Sadaqa and has a much wider meaning. To illustrate the importance of voluntary charity in our daily life, prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said " ... ***even meeting your brother with a cheerful face is Sadaqa***".

We are encouraged to remind ourselves of Allah's generosity (Surat 6:165): ***It is He Who has made you the inheritors of the earth and has raised you in ranks, some above others, that He may try you in the gifts that He has given you; for your Lord is quick in punishment, yet He is indeed Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.***

Another obligation upon Muslims is the fasting of the month of Ramadan. People abstain from food, drink and sexual relations from first light until sunset. However, the temporarily incapacitated (eg. sick, pregnant, travellers on a journey, etc.) are permitted to not observe the fast and make up an equal number of days later. In the case of those who are physically unable to fast (eg. the very old, sufferers of prolonged illness), they must feed a needy person for each day that is missed. Children are encouraged to fast and observe prayer

before the age of ten.

Medical science shows that fasting is beneficial to the health. However, the main reason for this annual practice is to remind us of those who are in greater need than ourselves and helps us become gratefully aware of Allah's provision and generosity.

The concept of fasting is also intended to help us abstain from spiritual immoralities such as backbiting, losing control over one's temper, jealousy and using bad language. Having had the opportunity to cleanse ourselves of all such undesired ailments, we can bid farewell to Ramadan with the intention of keeping the spirit of this holy month lodged deep in our hearts for the whole year.

At the end of Ramadan, prayers are offered in celebration of the Eid-al-Fitr. This is a festival commemorating the completion of the fasting month.

Fasting is a requirement that is prescribed to all who accept the Message of Allah (Surat 2:183): **O you who believe! Fasting is enjoined upon you as it was enjoined upon those before you, that you become conscious (of Allah).**

The fifth pillar of Islam obligates Muslims, *who* are physically and financially able, to perform the pilgrimage to Makkah - called Haj in Arabic. This pillar stands in support of the ancient call of Abraham (peace be upon him) to all Muslims to visit this sacred place which houses the holy Ka'ba. The able Muslim is required to perform Haj only once in his/her lifetime.

The demands of Haj (exertions of the journey and rites of the pilgrimage) unite all Muslims on a common platform that witnesses loyal obedience towards the Creator. Clad in simple garments that strip away distinctions of class and culture, Muslims from all over the world assemble in dedicated worship.

The completion of Haj is marked by a festival, the Eid-al-Adha, which is celebrated with prayers and the offering of animal sacrifices.

Haj is a time that calls for self-restraint and righteousness. Allah instructs (Surat 2:197): **The months of Haj are well known. Whoever intends to perform pilgrimage in these months shall abstain from sensual indulgence, wicked conduct and quarrelling; and whatever good you do, Allah knows it. And take your provisions for the pilgrimage, but the best of provisions is piety.**

The Sunnah and Hadith

Prophet Muhammad's life (peace be upon him) stands as a model for all mankind. History portrays many of his exemplary qualities that led him to be a great messenger of Allah.

The teachings of the holy Quran, the guidance from our Creator, are beautifully blended with the practice of His last messenger. To clarify this important combination, Allah has instructed Muslims to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in their daily lives. Allah's Words were delivered to His prophet, informing him to address those who are faithful to their Creator (Surat 3:31): **Say: "If you do love Allah, follow me: Allah will love you and forgive you your sins: for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."**

The Sunnah is the practice of the last messenger - an example chosen for all mankind as the Creator's gift of guidance. This guidance is made perfect by the characteristic sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which were also inspired to him by Allah. The inspired teachings of the prophet were later narrated by his trusted companions and recorded with great precision. These ancient records form the invaluable source of Hadith.

Thus, an example of a Hadith narrates that the messenger of Allah said, **"He who eats to his fill while his neighbour goes without food is not a Believer (of Allah and His teachings)".**

A practising Muslim is therefore one who holds fast to the teachings of Allah as presented in the form of the glorious Quran and the Sunnah of His messenger, prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Women and Parents in Islam

Women have a very special place in Islam and are regarded as the foundation of a society. At home, the woman shares responsibility with her spouse in serving as the first and most important school for the children. The young generation is nourished with Islamic principles, which provide divine guidance in life. At a tender age, Muslim children absorb information that sets them gently on the path of recognising their relationship with the surroundings: their parents, the society and the Creator.

For any system to function correctly, the role of individuals must be specified clearly within that system. It is only sensible to expect that if the responsibilities of all concerned were identical in nature and without differentiation of tasks, the system will eventually be laboured with problems.

Allah, in purposeful planning, has distinguished the responsibilities for the man with relation to those of his partner. He is the likely provider for the family. If necessity calls, the spouse can help in this demanding role. However, it must be made clear that, regardless of her personal earnings, it remains the duty of the husband to finance the needs of his family from his own income. The wife is not obligated by Islam to spend from her savings. Nevertheless, if she volunteers financial assistance, she could do so by her own free will and her contribution is regarded as a gesture of kindness and generosity. Thus, a Muslim woman may take up employment or establish a business, but her earnings may be used solely for her personal requirements.

Because the duties of both parents are crucial towards rearing sound discipline in the new generation, their responsibilities must span over all the essential needs of the family. The successful accomplishment of this joint partnership can only be achieved if these duties are distributed separately amongst the parents. The combined effort of two individuals, each taking up a specialist role, produces the desired success - a stable and happy family. Such a family lays the foundation for a prosperous society.

Sadly, we have only to see examples of the 'advanced' societies of modern times to appreciate the source of our problems. Both man and wife are racing in the accomplishment of the material desires of the family, relegating the responsibility towards the moral and spiritual needs of the young generation to a lesser priority. The young, having been starved of the awareness of their real purpose in life, grow up in the footsteps of their parents. Their overwhelming desire is concentrated towards securing material gains and sensual pleasures.

Another major problem in today's society concerns the unfair image labelled upon the woman. Her physical attributes are given unlimited publicity by the media. As a result of this constant psychological programming, a woman's sexual appeal greatly precedes all her other characteristics to anyone she comes into contact with. The female's role in society is thus greatly undermined and her preconceived image is an inexcusable insult to all women.

Islam had identified this problem hundreds of years ago. In revelations to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Allah instructed that women should dress modestly and cover themselves in a way such that their feminine attributes are not physically highlighted. Women can thus perform their duties unharassed and be justly recognised for their role in society.

In the matter of inheritance, the holy Quran manifests the justice that is blessed upon women. The legal entitlement, designed by the Creator, speaks of the honour bestowed upon a woman by considering her rights in all matters of life. Allah instructs (Surat 4:7 to 9): ***From what is left by parents and those nearest related, there is a share for men and a share for women, whether the property be small or large, a determinate share. But if at the time of division other relatives, or orphans, or poor are present, give them (out of the property), and speak to them words of kindness and justice. Let those (disposing of all estate) have the same fear in their minds as they would have for their own if they had left a helpless family behind: let them fear Allah, and speak appropriate words.***

A Muslim lady has equal right to the man in choosing a partner for marriage. She can accept or refuse a proposal based upon her personal choice eg. looks, qualities that make up a person's character, etc.

Once married, Allah calls upon all husbands to observe the duties towards their spouses and says (Surat 4:19): ***Live with them on a footing of kindness and equity.***

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasised upon the kindness towards wives by saying, ***"The most perfect Muslim in the matter of faith is one who has excellent behaviour; and the best among you are those who behave best towards their wives"***. The prophet also said, ***"Whatever you spend for the pleasure of Allah, will have its recompense, even if you put a morsel in the mouth of your wife (out of affection, will be an act deserving reward)"***.

The Muslim mother enjoys a tremendous role within the family. To her children, she is the angel who provides them with love, care and protection. In addition to her qualities of kindness, the mother undertakes the duty of teaching her offspring the essentials of Islam, thus becoming their first and most trusted guide.

Since the Muslim parent exerts such great effort towards the sound raising of her children, she is rightfully given a special status in society. It is narrated that a man came to prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and asked, "O Messenger of Allah, which person of all people is most entitled to kind treatment and good companionship from me?" The prophet answered, "*Your mother*". The man asked, "And then?" He answered, "*Your mother*". The man asked again, "And after her?" He answered, "*Your mother*". The man persisted, "And after my mother?" The prophet said, "*Your father*". The prophet repeated 'mother' three times to emphasise upon her special status with relation to everyone else, including the father.

The father also plays a significant role. He is the provider for the family and takes the responsibility of availing Islamic and other beneficial schooling for the children. Together with his wife, the demanding parental duties are thus successfully met. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) enjoined gratitude towards the parents and said, "***May his nose be rubbed in dust (ie. may he be humiliated; he said this three times, for emphasis), who found his parents, one or both, approaching old age, but did not enter Paradise (by serving them)***".

Polygamy in Islam

Islam's view of polygamy is very much a misunderstood concept amongst non-Muslims. Many wonder at the system that legally permits up to four wives at one time. However, the uninformed critic fails to ask a basic question: "When polygamy is accepted in Islam, how many Muslims do I personally know who have more than one wife?" In almost all instances, the response will be "None!"

Why then should a system that is supported by strong pillars of morality and righteousness allow polygamy? The reason is quite simple and one that fits harmoniously with the just and conscientious code of Islam: some conditions do necessitate polygamy.

The legislation against polygamy in non-Muslim countries highlights the hypocrisy of their social systems. In the search for satisfying one's sensual desires, it has become common for a man to keep a mistress without the knowledge of his wife. Such a practice is not only grossly unfair to the unaware spouse, but inevitably deprives her of her own immediate lights of love, sincerity, respect and basic consideration for her human feelings and feminine needs. Sadly, illicit relationships have become so widespread that many societies are laboured with the burden of consequential divorce and one-parent families.

To add to the misery of such 'civilised' nations, cohabitation has also become an accepted practice. This has proved to be an even larger problem since the partners of such relationships, not feeling committed to one another by law, eventually desert their playful nest. The offspring suddenly find themselves thrown into a life of turmoil and confusion. The uncertain future leaves a resentful and everlasting impression on their minds.

As consequence of hypocritical legislations, that disallow the keeping of more than one legal wife, multi-partner relationships are widely practised with abundant deceit. Islam recognises the fact that there are some conditions that require the lawful allowance of polygamy.

Consider the situation of children living with their mother and who are without the moral or financial support of the father (either because of death, divorce or other circumstance). There are men who are prepared to take the responsibility of rearing such a family. In the process of their daily provision, the man will become well acquainted with the children and their mother. A feeling of trust may develop between them, but this relationship is incomplete. The family still lacks the constant support of a father and the mother remains deprived of a partner who could fulfil her natural feminine needs. If such an inadequate relationship was to continue without wedlock, it could turn into an unlawful attraction of the physical nature of two adults. The consequence of such an unhealthy development may not only harm their trusted relationship, but could also affect the harmony of the man's own family. Thus, in the well-intentioned act of supporting the needs of a widow and her children, the situation may result in depriving two families of their long-term needs.

Aside from efficiently accomplishing the duties of providing for another family, there is another need for polygamy. Statistics show that the number of women throughout the world greatly exceeds that of men. This means that if every man was to get married, there would still remain a large surplus of women who will be compelled into becoming resigned spinsters. Since their natural physical needs must be fulfilled, illicit relationships as mistresses could develop and scar the peace of many homes.

In cases where a woman is infertile, her husband may aspire to have children or heirs. If monogamy is obligated by the law, the man will be forced to either accept the fact that he will never have children of his own or divorce his wife and take on a new partner.

A similar kind of problem may arise if a woman becomes chronically ill. It is unnatural for her husband to suppress his physical desires indefinitely. It will also be immoral of him to keep a mistress for the purpose of satisfying his physical needs.

Polygamy in the circumstances mentioned above comes as a mercy to society. Not only does it enable the taking of another partner responsibly, but it also protects families from breaking up. Moreover, Islam makes it compulsory upon the man to support his families with equal care and fairness. On the other hand, monogamy encourages people to act unscrupulously and become morally and lawfully irresponsible towards taking another partner. A system that enjoins people to take advantage of one another without accepting responsibility must be morally and scrupulously rejected.

During the prophet's life (peace be upon him), many Muslim men were killed in battles instigated by the idol-worshippers of Makkah. Consequently, many orphans were left destitute and many widows lost their loving support. Muslim families were instructed to support one other and encouraged to take added responsibility (Surat 4:3 & 4): ***If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or that which your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.***

It becomes clear from the Quran verses that polygamy is neither mandatory nor encouraged in normal circumstances, but simply permitted in situations where it serves in solving problems of a special nature. It also becomes evident that polygamy is not designed to fulfil physical desire, but is made available as a mercy upon mankind to live in a cohesive society that thrives upon trust, morality and mutual responsibility.

The Elderly in Islam

Having considered the Islamic responsibilities of parents towards the younger generation, it becomes apparent that such effort requires a lifetime of toil and loving patience. The child is held gently by the hand and steered to adulthood with tender guidance and experienced advice.

Once matured with time and knowledge, the young adult continues to look up to the trusted care of his lifelong guides whose experience still serves at times of need. Because of their natural love and timeless care, parents inevitably earn the confidence and deep affection of their children. The young members of the family now see it as their opportunity to return part of the care that they were nourished with since infants. These feelings of gratitude develop into a sense of loving obligation towards the parents; an obligation reciprocated to the elders who are now turning grey and feeble with age.

In an Islamic society, the presence of isolated homes for the old is regarded as an insult to the elderly and manifests shameful ingratitude from society. As the young were nursed in their tender years of need, the aged are gratefully supported in their latter years; a dignified age attained after a lifetime of affectionate contribution towards home and community.

Allah instructs in the holy Quran (Surat 17:23 & 24): ***Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them but address them in terms of honour. And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility and say: "My Lord, bestow upon them Your Mercy as they cherished me in childhood".***

The duty towards parents is clarified in many parts of the Quran. In one such instance, Allah says (Surat 46:15

& 16): ***We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents; in pain did his mother bear him and in pain did she give him birth. The carrying (of the child) to his weaning is (a period of) thirty months. At length, when he reaches the age of full strength and attains forty years, he says, "O my Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for Your favour which You have bestowed upon me, and upon both my parents, and that I may work righteousness such as You may approve; and be gracious to me in my offspring. Truly have I turned to You and truly do I submit (to You) in Islam". Such are they from whom We shall accept the best of their deeds and pass by their ill deeds; (they shall be) among the Companions of the Garden: a promise of truth, which was made to them (in this life).***

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also stressed upon the obligation towards parents by saying, ***"Among the major sins are: association of anybody with Allah, disobedience of parents, killing of a person and taking a false oath"***.

Allah addresses our problems

When one's problems increase with time, one wonders whether solutions can ever be found to save one from overwhelming miseries. In desperation, many seek remedy to their troubles in avenues that specialize in the destruction of the body and mind eg. alcohol and drugs. The intention is to paralyse the mind so that the miseries are temporarily suspended or forgotten. The problems inevitably return to haunt their victims as soon as they revive from their self-inflicted daze.

Others seek peace for their misery by joining a cult with radical beliefs. Living without a clear purpose in life, the intention here is to occupy oneself with anything that distracts one's attention away from mounting personal anxiety. Sadly, when hoping to lessen the burden of a meaningless life, one falls deeper into problems of greater proportion.

Who is then responsible for man's helplessness? When the Creator has provided mankind with detailed guidance for their assured success, man can only blame himself for disregarding such guidance. After choosing to stray from the divine teachings that are designed for our benefit, the consequence of resorting to one's boundless whims leads to a meaningless life of discontent.

Our Creator is knowledgeable of our problems and has addressed them for our awareness. We must therefore embrace the guidance of the holy Quran: Allah's eternal Word of wisdom.

The Quran mentions all aspects of human life. Each aspect of man's existence (whether it is social, political or spiritual) is explained in many parts of this holy Book. Individually, the explanations clarify the core of the topic being defined for man's benefit. Collectively, the teachings provide essential guidance for mankind to lead a contented life that enjoys real purpose.

The holy Quran addresses the varying needs of people. Thus, to benefit from the wisdom of these divine revelations, the individual must seek the guidance that refers to his/hers particular needs.

We can pick a few references in the Quran in which Allah addresses our problems. For a fuller understanding of the Creator's guidance, the holy Quran must be consulted to acquire benefit from the many references available on these and other topics.

The problem of racism is a very serious one that causes discomfort and oppression to its victims.

Allah instructs (Surat 49:13): ***O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (one who is) the most righteous of you. Certainly, Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).***

Alcoholism and gambling are common addictions in many communities. Islam teaches us that if a larger quantity of a thing is evil and harmful to society, then it must not be taken even in smaller portions.

The Quran reads (Surat 5:91): ***Satan's plan is to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of Allah and from prayer: will you not then abstain?***

Adultery has grave implications on society. One of the verses warns (Surat 17:32): ***Nor come near to adultery: for it is an indecent (deed) and an evil way.***

When distressed with the burdens of misfortune or a purposeless life, many people resort to suicide, believing that ending one's life is the only way out of one's misery. This act of self-destruction is considered as a major sin in Islam.

Allah comforts (Surat 4:29): ***O you who believe! Eat not up your property among yourselves in vanities, but let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual good-will; nor kill (or destroy) yourselves, for verily Allah has been to you Most Merciful!***

Furthermore, prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) teaches us (Surat 15:56): ***“And who despairs of the mercy of his Lord, but such as go astray?”***

Allah kindly guides (Surat 2:195): ***And spend of your substance in the cause of Allah, and make not your own hands contribute to (your) destruction; but do good, for Allah loves those who do good.***

Arrogance is a vice that evolves from various sources such as racism, the wealthy looking down on the poor, the strong feeling superior to the weak, etc.

The Quran provides valuable advice for the righteous (Surat 31:18): ***And swell not your cheek (for pride) at men. Nor walk in insolence on the earth: for Allah loves not any arrogant boaster. And be moderate in your pace and lower your voice; for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass.***

Only few of society's ailments have been considered here from many that are addressed in the holy Quran. Yet, for the mentioned problems, other divine revelations are also available in this Book of Guidance to help man overcome his worldly troubles.

Allah has availed man complete guidance to enable him take up the special form (or role) that is blessed upon him. However, if man ungratefully chooses to disregard the teachings of the Creator and to settle for a lesser role (by disowning the responsibilities that were assigned to him), he has only himself to blame for the unfortunate consequences.

Allah explains (Surat 95:4 to 6): ***We have indeed created man in the best of forms, then do we abase him (to be) the lowest of the low, except such as believe and do righteous deeds: for they shall have a reward unfailing.***

May Allah guide us towards righteousness and help us to benefit from His wisdom.

Islam's view of death and the hereafter

Scientists today agree with the statement revealed in the Quran that the universe took its present shape over many significant stages, the earliest of which was the formation of gases. Water, plantation and creatures appeared at later points in time.

Allah explains in the holy Quran (Surat 41:11 & 12): ***Then He turned to the sky, and it had been (as) smoke; He said to it and to the earth: "Come you together, willingly or unwilling". They said "We do come (together) in willing obedience". So He completed them as seven firmaments in two Days, and He assigned to each heaven its duty and command. And We adorned the lower heaven with lights and (provided it) with guard. Such is the Decree of (Him) the Exalted in Might, full of knowledge.***

The concept of death in Islam is consistent with the rest of creation, where the journey from plan to destiny undergoes specific events. Once the soul is created by Allah, it experiences several distinct stages.

The soul takes up residence in the foetus several months before delivering the child into the world. The human body is designed to be a temporary abode that will cease its purpose of existence once the time is ordained for the soul to abandon it. This stage of the soul's departure from the body is termed as Death. In Islam, this final phase of the worldly life is also regarded as the *return* of the soul to its Creator. The body served as a temporary container for the soul and has now perished. The soul, however, was not designed to die and continues to live.

The soul now enters the next stage, a transitory world, where it lies in wait for the Day of Judgement. Here, the soul awaits the time when the righteous will flock into Paradise and the wicked will crowd into Hell. The Quran defines this stage as a 'Partition', awaiting the Day when all will be raised for recompensation (Surat 23:99 & 100): ***Until, when death comes to one of them, he says "O my Lord! Send me back (to life) in order that I may work righteousness in the things that I neglected". By no means! It is but a word he says. Before them is a Partition till the Day they are raised up.***

The Day of Judgement is a time of tremendous anxiety. Every soul will appear before the Creator to account for its performance on Earth. Based upon its actions and intentions, the soul will be justly recompensed. This is the platform where the truth will manifest itself to the terror of those who doubted the existence and teaching of their Creator. The unfortunate on this Day shall not plead innocence for sheer ignorance when prophets of Allah were purposefully sent for guidance to all nations of the world.

The final stage unfolds the promised abodes. Once created, the soul's fate was destined to live eternally. The righteous will be ushered by angels of Allah into Paradise with salutations of peace. Alas, the wicked will be greeted with dismay by the angels who will usher each crowd into hell by asking them if no one had warned them of this Day. Their sad and regretful response is divinely predicted. The Holy Quran records Allah's foretelling Words (Surat 67:9): ***They will say: "Yes indeed. A Warner did come to us, but we rejected him and said, 'God never sent down any (Message); you are in nothing but a great delusion' ".***

In His perfect knowledge of the destiny of mankind, Allah explains to us in simple but clear Words (Surat 36:9): ***It is Allah Who sends forth the winds, so that they raise up the clouds, and We drive then to a land that is dead, and revive the earth therewith after its death: thus (will be) the Resurrection!***

Having clarified His message to us, our Lord further states (Surat 57:17): ***Know you (all) that Allah gives life to the earth after its death! Already have We shown the Signs plainly to you that you may understand.***

Your purpose in life

If each of us was to ask oneself, "What is the purpose of my life?", our response will vary from one individual to the other. We generally seek meaning and satisfaction in the routines of life. A doctor may see the healing of the sick as fulfilling his purpose in life. On the other hand, a mason may take pride in his work and feel that his purpose in life lies around mortar and bricks. Others yet, like the terminally ill, may helplessly decide that life just has no purpose at all!

Whatever we manage to content ourselves with, can our life's purpose simply revolve around our short stay on Earth? For those who struggled through many years of dedicated effort and calculated investment in establishing a profession, trade or expertise, death inevitably rips apart their life-long achievements.

Having been developed from the fusion of the microscopic sperm with the ovary - then to experience the ups and downs of life, until one's exhaustive efforts start to reap the desired benefits - the human finds himself bidding farewell to all that he had held on to dearly in the world.

Our life's achievements therefore cannot be the sole purpose of our existence on Earth. Allah clarifies in the holy Quran (Surat 75:36 to 40): ***Does man think that he will be left uncontrolled (without purpose)? Was he not a drop of sperm emitted (in lowly form)? Then did he become a leach-like clot; then did (Allah) make and fashion (him) in due proportion. And of him He made two sexes, male and female. Has not He (the same) power to give life to the dead?***

Justice demands that there be life after death. When we see someone oppressing masses of helpless people, and he seems to get away with his crimes without being brought before a court of law, it makes no sense that such a person escapes unpunished. Sentencing a multiple killer to death may be fair recompense for one of his victims. However, his singular death cannot be fair punishment for all his other victims.

The Quran records Allah's prediction (Surat 69:25 to 35): ***And he that will be given his Record in his left hand will say, "Ah! Would that my Record had not been given to me! And that I had never realised how my account (stood). Ah! Would that (death) had made an end of me! Of no profit to me has been my wealth! My power has perished from me!"***

Man is encouraged to do good with promises of generous rewards. Lacking incentives, we would be like beasts in the wild: living simply for today, trampling upon each other's rights and wandering in life without purpose.

Allah promises (Surat 3:133 & 134): ***Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord and for a Garden whose width is that (the whole) of the heavens and of the earth, prepared for the righteous. Those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity or in adversity; who restrain anger and pardon (all) men; for Allah loves those who do good.***

On a lighter note, if we were to question ourselves on what would be the ideal age to live up to, the response will be without hesitation: forever! Despite the fact that our physical body will end sooner or later, we amusingly entertain the wish for living endlessly. Islam explains this desire as the feeling projected from the soul - the spiritual part of man that is destined to live eternally.

From the light of the above, our purpose as humans stretches beyond the boundary of the physical body. We must therefore look for clear and reasonable answers to our spiritual needs. Our Creator is our most qualified Guide. His teachings were delivered to mankind by chosen prophets. However, most of these teachings were distorted and corrupted with the passage of time. Our task therefore remains in identifying the original and genuine source of guidance and which is attributed to the Creator Himself. Anything else would be going astray.

To employ the guidance of a particular faith, the subject must be scrutinised for consistency of its teachings. For instance, a divine book cannot enjoin moral conduct in one chapter and yet condone evil or immoral behaviour in another. The teachings must also provide guidance for man in all aspects of daily life with unfailing remedies. The code that satisfies these essential criteria will manifest the source of truth - the Maker's code for our guidance.

We can focus on the natural concept of Islam. Its teachings can be put under practical truth-seeking tests. When the Quran is the genuine Word of God, does it address our varying needs and concerns ie. personal, social, other? What does it say about alcoholism, gambling, usury, adultery, racism, oppression, backbiting, jealousy and other social diseases? What are the guidelines provided for the family regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, love, loyalty and responsibility? What about the rights of the wife, husband, parents,

children, neighbours, orphans and other constituents of a society - whether the individuals are Muslims or not? When the Creator has instructed man to adhere to His teachings and to follow the practices of His last messenger, does the unique combination of the Quran and the Sunnah provide guidance for all our needs?

The holy Quran has been Islam's invitation to the truth since the time of its revelation, many hundreds of years ago. Many unbelievers had accused it to be the work of prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In response to this, Allah defends His Word by challenging man to produce a short piece of text that could resemble the profundity of the Message (providing lasting guidance regardless of location and time) and literary command of the Quran. Every other book has required substantial revision as advancement in time and knowledge highlight its shortcomings. Renowned philosophers could at best provide theories that only served a short period in time and that were soon outlived as circumstances changed.

The Quran enjoys a unique advantage. It is the only Word attributed to our Creator that was recorded by the messenger who received its revelation and which is preserved in its original form. The Quran today stands unaltered and its Message continues to provide guidance for man in the ever-changing needs of modern times.

Like an operating manual provided by the manufacturer for the proper use of a device, the guidelines for life is provided by our Maker. The Quran is Allah's Word, guaranteed divinely against corruption and serving as the direct link between man and Creator. After being given the power of reasoning that helps us to differentiate between right from wrong, and truth from falsehood, our responsibility now rests upon benefiting from the guidance as reasoned in the divine Scripture. Allah says (Surat 76:78): ***And Allah brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing; and He gave you the faculties of hearing, sight and understanding: that you may give thanks (to Allah).***

Everything that we do is accountable to Allah. Islam teaches us that any effort exerted in obedience to the Creator is regarded as an act of worship. Thus, we serve Allah by discharging our responsibilities correctly and in accordance to His teachings. Even the effort of providing for dependants (like parents, wife and children) and all other common acts of daily life are forms of worship and favoured as serving Allah when performed in compliance with His guidelines.

In the light of the Quran, Allah guides mankind to serve Him in worship and clarifies to us our purpose in life (Surat 51:55 to 58): ***But remind, for reminding benefits the Believers. I have only created jinn and men that they may serve Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. For Allah is He Who gives (all) sustenance - Lord of Power, Steadfast (forever).***

When searching for the truth in order to understand the purpose of life, one is required to address the Quran without bias and with the intention of seeking guidance. Allah *guarantees* the light of knowledge to those who seek the truth. The Creator speaks to mankind through the Quran with clear Words of wisdom. These are Words that nurse our troubles and anxieties, with divinely assured peace, and which help us to achieve lasting happiness. When these Words find their natural way to our hearts, our purpose in life will be to follow the teachings of our Creator. We are thus steered to a peaceful life that is not just limited to our worldly abode. Allah reassures us of Paradise (Surat 14:23): ***But those who believe and work righteousness will be admitted to Gardens beneath which rivers flow, to dwell therein for ever with the leave of their Lord. Their greeting therein will be: "Peace!"***

This material is a stepping stone towards understanding Islam in relation to the worldly life and the hereafter. The journey required for appreciating our Creator's Message could take several steps. Islamic scholars can be consulted for further information and guidance in paving the path to eternal success.

May Allah protect us from straying and guide us to the truth so that we achieve our intended purpose in life.