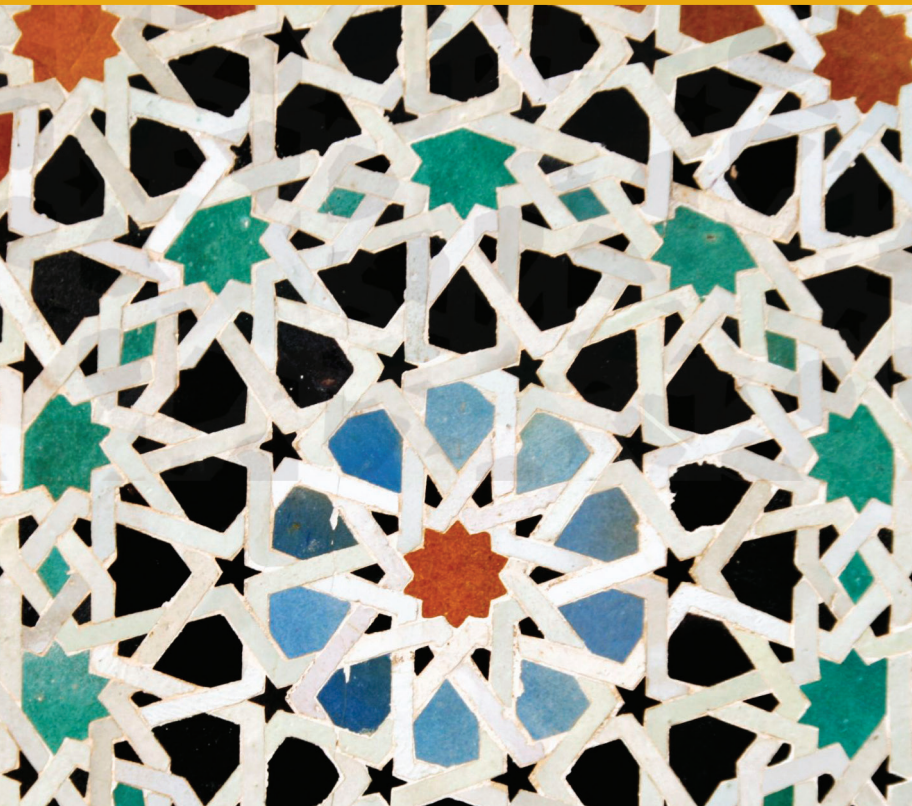


Discover Islam

MAN KNOW THYSELF

MAULANA WAHIDUDDIN KHAN





*In the name of Allah
The Merciful, the Compassionate*

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Man Know Thyself

If a group of people were asked what the most important issue for mankind was today, different people would have different answers. Some would say the spread of nuclear weapons, some, the population explosion, while others might say that the production and distribution of wealth were of paramount importance. Such diversity of opinion shows that people in general do not properly recognize what they themselves are. If they did, they would all agree that the most critical issue facing mankind was man's disregard of his real nature, and his persistence in ignoring the inescapable fact that one day he must die, and be called to account before his Maker. If we were to become aware of the reality of existence, it would be to the afterlife rather than to this world that we would direct our attention.

Today, most people do believe in God and in the afterworld. It is not as if they deny these things; but their actions bear no relation to their belief. In practice, all that people are concerned about is

worldly success. If our research laboratories were one day to declare that the earth's gravitational pull had ceased to exist, and that the planet was being pulled towards the sun at a speed of 6,000 m.p.h., then panic would strike the whole world, for such news would imply that within a few weeks all life would be obliterated from the face of the earth.

This globe, however, is perpetually facing a peril much greater than this, yet no one feels the need to become anxious about it. What is this peril? It is the peril of the Last Day which has been destined for the world since the creation of the universe and towards which we are careering at a reckless speed. As an article of faith, most of us accept this reality, but there are few indeed who actually feel compelled to give it serious thought.

If you stand in a busy shopping-centre during the evening rush-hour and observe what people are hurrying towards, you will realize what today's human-being has chosen as his fundamental issue. Why do you think there is an endless stream of traffic in the streets? Why has the merchant decorated his shop? Where are the crowds of people coming from and going to? What is the main topic of people's conversation and the true purpose of their meetings with one another? What interests them most? To

what use are their finest talents and resources put? What has this exuberant person obtained that has thrilled him so, and what has that dejected face been deprived of that it has so stricken a look? What have people taken with them, from their homes, and what do they intend to return with? If you can answer these questions,—judging from the nature of people's preoccupations, the sounds they emit, their agitation and quiescence—you will also be able to deduce exactly what it is that mankind has chosen to base his life on, and what he is endeavouring to achieve. It is plain for all to see from the constant procession of people to and from the towns and their continuous comings and goings on the crowded streets that today's human being is simply running after the satisfaction of his own desires. It is the world rather than the afterlife which he is eager to obtain. His happiness hinges on the fulfilment of his worldly ambitions, while his grief stems from the fact that this seemingly eludes him. The everyday concept of success is the immediate acquisition of commodities, and the enjoyment of leisure and popular acclaim, while failure, to them, means to be deprived of these things. This is what the whole of humanity is chasing after. No one cares about tomorrow; everyone becomes frenetic about getting his share now, today, this very minute.

This state of affairs is prevalent not only in our big cities but even in the tiniest human settlements; wherever one goes, people seem to be similarly obsessed. Male and female, rich and poor, old and young, urbane and rustic, even the religious and irreligious—all are running in this same direction. What man is most pre-occupied with is grabbing whatever he can in this world. This is what he considers to be worthwhile and this is what he spends his precious time and talents on. This is what obsesses him night and day. No sacrifice, however dubious in character is too great if it brings him these things. He is even ready to sacrifice his faith and his conscience for them at the altar of worldly gain. His struggle is for worldly ends alone, and he cares not what this struggle entails. No compromise is too base for him.

Every success gained in this way, however, is trivial and mundane and will be of no avail in the afterlife. He who is concerned with consolidation of his worldly position at the expense of the afterlife is like the young man who does not care to save up for his old age. Eventually the time comes when his limbs fail him and he becomes unfit for further toil. Suddenly he realizes his predicament: he is without food, clothes and shelter. He is no longer able to provide for himself. In rags, he lies down in despair in the shade of some wall where the dogs bark at him and

boys throw stones. Though we witness with our own eyes the plight of those who have not 'saved up' for the afterlife, we are still not galvanised into action. All of us are too concerned with the consolidation of our present positions. No one gives a thought of tomorrow.

When the air-raid siren sounds in wartime and proclaims in its chilling wail: "Squadrons of enemy bombers are approaching to blast this city to eternity. To the air-raid shelters at once!" everyone immediately takes the quickest route to the shelters and, in an instant, the busiest of streets are deserted. Anyone who does not react in this manner is considered idiotic, mentally deranged. The same applies to any material hazard, no matter what it may be. There is another danger, however, even more terrible and inevitable, concerning which the Lord of the Worlds has given us due warning, proclaiming his imperatives through his prophets: "Mankind! Worship Me, fulfill your obligations to one another and live in accordance with My will. I will punish those who fail to do this in a way that cannot be imagined. They will writhe forever in a torment from which they will never be able to free themselves." Every ear has heard this declaration and every tongue acknowledges it in one form or the other, but the general attitude is to treat it as a matter

of no consequence. In order to avail themselves of worldly advantages people perpetrate every form of misdemeanour. In this way life's caravan is proceeding heedlessly towards a point of no return. People start in response to the siren screeching out from the military H.Q., but no importance is attached to the danger signal which the Lord of the Universe sounds for mankind. Far from hastening at the sound of it, no one even alters his pace.

What can the reason for this anomalous state of affairs be? It is simply that the danger about which the military headquarters' siren warns us is of this world. Everyone perceives this and knows that its effects will be immediately felt. The danger which God has cautioned us about, on the other hand, will be felt in the afterlife. The wall of death stands between us and its realization: the eyes of the world cannot penetrate it. Neither its planes, nor its bombs, nor its engulfing fire and smoke, are apparent to us. Although people immediately respond to the air-raid siren, they remain unaffected and dispassionate on hearing of the calamity of which God has given us ample warning. The news does not impress upon them the absolute certainty of their doom and, this being so, they do not feel spurred on to atone for their sins, or to begin leading righteous lives.

God Most Sublime, however, has given us not only our two eyes with which to perceive the external world, but also a third 'eye' which can scan the invisible realities which lie beyond the horizons of perception. This eye is that of the intellect. People remain in a state of doubt because they do not use this third eye. They reckon that reality is what they see before their own two eyes, whereas, if they were to ponder over the matter, they would become even more certain about what remains unseen than about what is visible.

What is the one reality that everybody acknowledges? Death must be the unanimous answer to this question. Death is a reality to which everyone, big or small, has to reconcile himself. Everyone realizes that death can overtake one at any time, but whenever the thought of death occurs to people, all that concerns them is : "What will happen to my children after I die?" Before death, thoughts of life dominate their minds, but if they project their thoughts beyond death, all that claims their attention is of a domestic nature. Most of their lives is spent safeguarding their children's future, but no efforts are made to insure themselves for the life that lies ahead. It seems from their attitude as if only their children will survive them, and that they themselves will be non-existent and so have nothing to prepare for.

People behave as if they are totally unaware of the fact that there is a life after death, whereas, in fact, the real life only commences after death. If they only realized that when they enter the grave, rather than being buried, they were being ushered into another world, they would be more worried about themselves than about their children's future. The fact is that most people whether religiously or agnostically inclined, are not convinced that after death they do not cease to exist, but expect rather to discover a new life more consequential than the present one.

Two factors cause one to have doubts about life after death. Firstly, on dying, every human being turns into dust and all traces of his body are effaced. How then can he subsequently be revived? Secondly, the life after death is not visible to us. The world of today is an observable phenomenon, but what about the afterlife? If no one has actually seen it, how can we place implicit trust in its advent? Let us look at both these objections in turn.

Life After Death

“When I am dead, will I then be raised up again?” This question may hover on the periphery of the consciousness of even those who do not have any deep convictions of the reality of life after death, but the fact remains that very few people give any direct attention to the question of the afterlife. The plain truth that tomorrow’s life is not willingly and eagerly contemplated in the present world is surely an indication of conscious or subconscious doubt as to its existence.

If, however, we give serious thought to this reality, it becomes easily comprehensible. God, wishing to put us to the test, has not divulged the secrets of life after death to us, but has spread His signs throughout the world which, if pondered over, can lead us to a true realization of the essence of all things. This universe is a mirror in which we can gaze upon the image of the next world.

It is common knowledge that human beings have not always existed in their present state. Man is derived from a formless substance, which gradually takes on the form of a human being as it grows in the mother’s

womb. This process continues until, in the outside world, it develops into a full-fledged human being. The metamorphosis of an insensate, valueless substance, imperceptible to the naked-eye, into a six-foot tall human being, is an everyday event, so why should there be any difficulty in understanding how the minute particles of our bodies, after being scattered in the ground, will once again take on a human form?

Every individual one sees walking around is, in fact, an accumulation of countless atoms, previously dispersed in unknown dimensions throughout the earth and atmosphere. Presently the forces of nature brought these atoms together in one meaningful, sensate pattern, so that we are now able to observe these same scattered atoms in the form of a human being capable of thought, feeling and movement. The very same process will be repeated when, subsequent to our death, our particles are diffused in the air, water and earth. Afterwards, at God's command, they will be reassembled and once again assume the form of a human-being. What is so extraordinary about the re-occurrence of an event which has already happened once before? Even in the world of matter there are indications of the practicability of a repetition of life. Every year, in the rainy season, vegetation flourishes and greenery spreads in all directions. Then the summer pronounces its death sentence and the earth dries up. Where flowers

bloomed, only a barren plain can be seen. Thus a fully- fledged life expires. But when the rains come again, and water pours down from the sky, that very same vegetation is revived and dry land once again becomes a meadow. In this very same manner man will be raised to life after his death.

Let's look at it from another angle. Doubts occur concerning life after death because our imagination is formulated in terms of our present physical existence. We consider the mobile figure outwardly apparent to us to be the essential human-being, and wonder how this form can be refashioned and raised up again once it has rotted away and mingled with the earth. We observe that when death strikes, an animate human-being becomes silent; his motion is halted and all his faculties cease to function. Afterwards he is buried in the ground, cremated or thrown into a river depending on the customs of the people concerned. A few days later, the body has been reduced to tiny particles and mingled with the earth in such a way as to be undetectable to normal vision. We witness daily the extinction of live human-beings in this manner and find it difficult to comprehend how a form so totally obliterated can possibly be revived.

The fact is that the word "man" refers, not to any such bodily form, but rather to the soul which inhabits the body. As far as the physical frame is concerned,

we know that it is composed of tiny particles called living cells. The position of cells in our body is like that of bricks in a building. The bricks of our physical structure, or cells, are continuously destroyed in the course of our daily lives and we compensate for this loss by taking in food. Food, once digested, produces various forms of cells which counterbalance this physical deficiency. Likewise the human body is constantly being eroded and altered. Old cells are destroyed and new ones take their place. This process continues daily until eventually total renovation of the body occurs, usually within a period of ten years. To put it another way, nothing whatsoever remains now of the body you possessed ten years ago. Your present physique is an entirely new one. If all the parts of your body severed from you over the last ten years were to be gathered together, then another human being identical to yourself could be constructed. If you are a hundred years old, then ten “you’s” could be formed which, despite their exact similarity to you in appearance, would be no more than inanimate lumps of flesh for “you” do not dwell within them. “You” have abandoned these old bodies and moulded yourself into a new frame.

So the saga of construction and destruction is constantly being enacted within you without any evident change occurring. That entity which you call yourself remains as it was. If you had entered into

a contract with someone ten years ago, you would continue to admit that “you” committed yourself in this manner, although your previous frame is now non-existent. Neither the hands which signed the contract papers, nor the tongue which testified to it, are any longer attached to your body. Nevertheless “you” still exist, and “you” acknowledge the fact that this ten-year old contract was your own and continue to abide by it. This is that inward human-being at work which, far from altering with bodily transformation, survives countless physical changes absolutely intact.

This proves that the word “homo sapiens”, rather than being a label attached to a certain physical form, which is erased with its death, is a separate entity which remains intact even after the diffusion of the body’s composite parts. The fact that the body alters whereas the soul does not, is conclusive proof of the transitional nature of the body and the eternal nature of the soul.

Some misguided people consider life and death to be the accumulation and subsequent diffusion of multitudinous particles of matter. This theory has been expounded by an Urdu poet, Chakbast, in the following words:

What is life? Elements arranging themselves
in order, And death? Their diffusion.’

This, however, is a statement which is not borne out by fact. If life were simply “elements arranging themselves in order”, then it follows that it should survive only so long as this orderliness endured, and it should conversely be possible for an expert scientist to create life by an accumulation of these elements; obviously, both these propositions are ludicrous.

We observe that it is not only those who have been torn limb from limb in some accident, who die. In every condition and at every age people are passing away. Sometimes perfectly healthy human beings suffer sudden heart-failure and no doctor can provide an explanation. We may regard a corpse as an “orderly, elemental manifestation”, but the soul which inhabited it has departed. All elements are arranged in the same order as they were a few minutes beforehand, but they are utterly lifeless. This shows that the organization of elemental matter does not create life, rather life is an entirely separate entity.

A live human being cannot be produced in a laboratory, though such a physical form can readily be formulated. We have ascertained that the particles which compose a live body consist of normal atoms. The carbon in it is the same as that found in charcoal, its hydrogen and oxygen are the same as that which constitutes water, its nitrogen exactly the same gas as

that which accounts for most of the atmosphere, and so on. But is it true to say that a live human being is a specific collection of ordinary atoms which have been arranged in an extraordinary way? Or is it something else besides this? Scientists admit that although we know that the body has been fabricated of certain material particles, we are still not in a position to create life just by combining these same particles. In other words, the body of a live human being is not just a conglomeration of inanimate atoms; rather it is a combination of life and atoms. After death the conglomeration of atoms remains visible to us, while life departs for another world.

Clearly, life is not something which can be eliminated. When we grasp that it is something with eternal properties, we can appreciate just how rational and natural the 'life-after-death' theory is. The facts cry out that life does not consist merely of what can be seen prior to death. There must be a life after death also. Our intellect accepts the transient nature of this world, but man is a being which survives it. When we die, we do not pass into oblivion, rather we retire to reside in another world. The present world is nothing but a tiny interlude in our never-ending life-span.

The Other World

Think for a moment what this other world must be like.

God's prophet has stated that heaven and hell exist there, and that everyone who dies must eventually find his eternal abode in one of the two. Those who are obedient to God in this world and act in a virtuous fashion will be rewarded with a place in paradise, while those who are evil and rebellious towards God will be cast into an excruciating Fire.

It is important to understand that human actions fall into one of two categories. The first comprises everyday, routine matters, in which no moral choice has to be made, and also purely accidental happenings whose outcome, whether good or bad, cannot be judged from the moral standpoint because they contained no purposive element. The second category is very different in nature because it covers a wide and complex range of actions the rights and wrongs of which have to be scrupulously considered before being carried out. This is known as the ethical category.

Imagine a stone balanced precariously on the branch of a tree. You walk under it, it falls, hits you, and you find yourself badly injured. Do you strike the tree and bear a grudge against it? Of course not. But suppose a man picks up a stone, throws it at you with the intention of injuring you and actually does so, won't you become enraged and feel an urge to retaliate in like manner? You would be perfectly justified in feeling that this wrong should be punished because the act was intentional. Here it is a question not just of some random happening, but of right and wrong action, good and bad intentions, in a word, of ethics.

The examples chosen to clarify this point are of a simple nature in that the outcome of the action is immediately apparent and, moreover, in the second case, it is possible to make an instant moral judgement. But there are other much more complex situations in life where wrong-doing goes undetected, its effects may be hidden or delayed for long periods, and the culprits may never be brought to book either by the moral condemnation of society or in a court of law. Sometimes evil-doing is, of course, perceived as such, but the miscreant is so clever and resourceful that he is able to escape punishment, or the human resources required to inflict punishment are lacking and so the evil-doer goes scot free. Crimes are often repeated for just such reasons. But the perpetrator of

evil should not congratulate himself too soon on the success of his schemes or on his ability to escape, for it is exactly this type of action that he will be called to account for by his Creator on the Day of Judgement. Everyone, no matter from what walk of life he hails, will be required to stand before his Maker and lay his life absolutely bare before Him. On the basis of the actions which fall into the ethical category, where moral precepts, scruples, are of overriding importance, he will either be ushered into paradise or cast down into the flaming pits of hell. If all this was kept hidden from him in this world, it was because it was God's plan to put man on trial.

The afterworld is where man will reap the full consequences of his deeds according to their moral nature. Every action has some consequences for the perpetrator, and every state that he finds himself in precipitates a favourable or unfavourable reaction. He then makes or breaks himself by the manner in which he employs his faculties.

The Afterworld

The question arises at this juncture as to the actual existence of this afterworld to which he is destined. In what way can it be apprehended? In what way can it be made intelligible to us?

Take sound, for instance. Everyone knows that sound is the name of waves which cannot be seen with the naked eye, and in the case of human utterance, resulting from the motion of our tongues and larynxes. It then forms a kind of invisible pattern in the air. Whenever anybody speaks, his voice is so indelibly imprinted on the atmosphere that, according to scientific theory, any sound uttered by a human-being even thousands of years ago, still exists in wave-form, though we do not hear or see these waves. If, however, we possessed the apparatus to detect them, they could be replayed exactly, in their original form, and many would be the historic discussion upon which we could then eavesdrop.

Just as we are enveloped by a blanket of air on which, every word of ours is engraved, even though we see neither the air nor the inscription, so the other world

is also enveloping us on all four sides and constantly recording our intentions and designs. Our actions are being imprinted upon its fold, and after death, they will be there for all to read. Imagine a record revolving mutely on its turntable. As soon as the needle falls into its groove, the silent disc bursts into music as if it had just been waiting to express the sounds recorded on it. In the same way a record of all our deeds is being prepared, and when the Lord of the Universe utters the word of command, the whole record will be played back to us. On hearing it people will involuntarily say, “What sort of a book is this which has omitted neither the smallest nor the gravest of matters?” (The Quran)

A Last Word

Just think over everything I have described for a few minutes. You are destined for an extremely long and unbroken lifespan. Death is by no means the termination of this life: it is the commencement of a new era. Death is simply the dividing-point between the two stages of our life. Take the farmer's planting of a crop as an example. He invests his capital in it and cultivates it, until such times as the crop ripens and dries up. Then he harvests it so that he can use the grain and store it up for his year's requirements. Harvest is the end of one phase in the crop's development, during which time planting and cultivation had taken place. Before the cutting of the crop there had been only toil and expense; it is afterwards that he will enjoy the fruits of his efforts.

This is the case with our life also. In this world we are investing in and cultivating our afterworld crop. Each one of us owns a field which is either being cultivated or left barren. We have used a seed which is either productive or mediocre. After sowing our crop, we have either attended to it or neglected it. Either we have cultivated thorns, or else flowers and fruits have

blossomed in our garden. We have either expended our energies on the improvement of our crop, or we have wasted our time in unnecessary and irrelevant occupations. The period of preparation of this crop lasts until death. The day of our death is harvest-day. When our eyes close on this world, they will open on the afterlife, and there, the crop which we have been busy cultivating all our lives will appear before us.

Remember that the person who does the farming is the one who does the harvesting, and he will reap only the crop that he has sown. Likewise in the afterworld, everybody will reap the harvest he had prepared for himself prior to his death. Every farmer knows full well that he will take as much grain to the granary as he has grown, and that the crop can never be other than the one he has sowed. Likewise, in the afterworld man will be recompensed according to the nature and ardour of his efforts in the world. Death is the final announcement of the termination of the time allotted to him for struggle and endeavour, and the afterworld is the final place in which he will be able to experience the results thereof. After death there will be no further opportunity to struggle, and it must be borne in mind that the afterlife will never terminate. What a critical matter this is! If only man could come to a mature understanding of this before he died, because his later realization will be of no

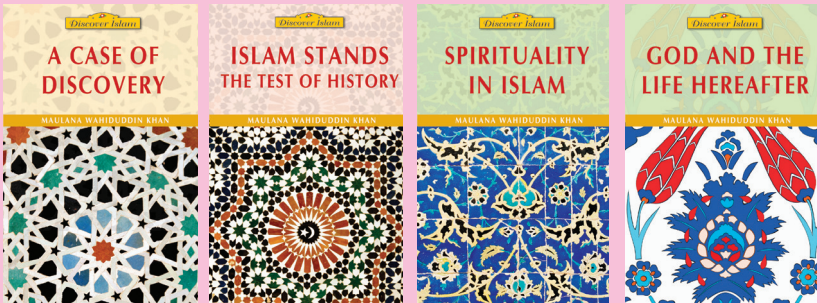
avail. Becoming aware of the truth only after death is too late. There is no time then to consider the gravity of one's errors, no time for repentance and certainly no time for expiations.

Mankind is oblivious of his destiny, while time is conveying him with the utmost speed towards the harvesting of his crop. He is busily engaged in procuring paltry worldly profits, and considers himself worthily occupied, whereas, in fact, he is just frittering away his precious time. He has before him a superb opportunity to ensure a prosperous future for himself, but instead, he chooses to occupy himself with bagatelles. His Lord is calling him towards paradise, a place of endless honour and bliss, while he, in his ignorance, is immersed in ephemeral and delusive pleasures. He reckons that he is saving, but in fact he is squandering. While constructing his worldly mansion, he is labouring under the illusion that he is building for his life, while in fact, he is erecting walls of sand which will crumble away to nothing.

Man! Recognize yourself! Know what you are doing.
and what you ought to be doing!

Discover Islam

In this series, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan presents the fundamental teachings of Islam in a simple way. The series provides the general reader with an accurate and comprehensive picture of Islam—the true religion of submission to God.



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