

Dear Friends,

Recent tragedies have prompted questions and uncertainties about Islam. I would like to share with you the meaning I have gained from practicing Islam during the last 12 years. I hope that my view will further your perspective and understanding.

Peace be upon you,

Amir

Terror of Islam

Holy war, suicide bombings, fighting for faith, and killing in the name of God - from Crusaders to terrorists, from sacred shrines to New York City, history is tainted by a grave disease afflicting humankind. This cancer of the heart ravages reason and emotion, breeding numb and blind souls who claw to their belief in desperate defense for meaning. Only infected fanatics are capable of twisting the sacred guidance common to all faiths into a weapon against the faithful. They leave their marks on time but they can not change the ideals shared by all religions; wisdom that can help heal and instill a peace that consoles us from inflicting more suffering.

What is the ideal of Islam? Islam is not a name that defines you as better than your neighbor or rewards you a special status with God. The name itself is an Arabic word derived from the meaning to surrender or submit. Islam is a way of life that guides your actions and forms your character. You embark on an inner journey to purge your soul, the true Self, from ego and vice by reverencing the One who created you from dust. Surrender is a state of unceasing awareness and appreciation of God's boundless attributes (Quran 7:205). As your soul submits, you are able to practice the meaning of peace, compassion, love, forgiveness, and charity that originate from one Source. You feel a gradual separation from the body that adorns the soul and all the attachments that nourish the ego. The shades of superiority, prejudice and judgment fade as the world comes into focus with the eyes of your soul. In Islam, the best among us in the sight of God is not the wealthy Christian, erudite Jew, or fanatic Muslim, but rather, the one who is the most righteous (Quran 49:13).

Islam is a way of life encouraged from the time of Abraham by Jesus, Muhammad and all messengers who have followed. The one who is able to surrender the soul is called a Muslim in Arabic, or Submitter. There are Submitters in every faith; a Buddhist Submitter, a Christian Submitter, or a Muslim Submitter. They are those who place no limits on their belief in the Unseen and impose no judgements on the different forms of striving that grow the soul closer to that which can never be touched (Quran 2:3). This common striving towards an Innermost and Outermost that has no definition encourages unity within a diverse group of people who advance their personal strides by learning from one another. It is only when the strokes of absolute and physical conditions are painted over God's light that a menacing blindness begins to fester (Quran 9:32). Individual faith is resigned to the interpretation of others and the soul becomes confined with complacency. The personal, open passage to the Divine becomes layered with uncertainties each being imposed on their own God-given potential. Fear begets fear in this darkness and the desperate defense of a conditioned reality consumes what little remains of the soul. The hurtful consequences are experienced unconsciously within relationships and brought to a rude awaking by incomprehensible events (Quran 23:71).

Islam is a way to consciousness that conditions the soul against this disease of the heart. The history of messengers and scriptures has been nothing more than a source of direction for each generation to surrender the soul. The nature of this recurring system is a testament to humankind's forgetful and unappreciative disposition (Quran 48:23). The Quran is a confirmation of the Torah and New Testament intended to serve as such a reminder for us today. There is no compulsion to read or follow, only an invitation to reflect. The intention of the stories, allegories, and teachings is to free the soul through the reverence of God (Quran 7:201). Practices such as daily contact prayers "salat" and prostration are simply an exercise of submission, an opportunity to appreciate God throughout the day, and a break in the rhythm of preoccupation that gradually numbs the soul (Quran 29:45). The emphasis is on feeling words of veneration move through your soul rather than what has become a fixation with the ritual form itself (Quran 107:4-5). The contact prayer is not an end but rather a first step to maintaining a steady connection with God, even for the spiritual minded who may feel waning cycles in their own practice. Prayer is not limited to this form or frequency. The Quran instills a sensitivity in the soul that inspires steady reflection on the grandeur of creation, the Creator, and beyond. Descriptions for such beliefs as "heaven," "hell," or the "hereafter" are merely allegorical representations of what our minds can not fathom. How else can one describe the sensation of being in God's presence? The Quran

cultivates the meaning of service, respect and tolerance in individuals who, together, can build what God deems as the best community; one that advocates righteousness (Quran 3:110). There are the rare souls who need no reminders, who are able to live and breathe a steady flow of submission. The ones who feel the challenge for this awareness are invited to reflect on the Quran's guidance.

What does the way of Islam teach about violence and intolerance? Among the many beautiful attributes that stimulate our reverence, the Quran describes God as the Most Gracious and Most Merciful, "rahmaan eh raheem". Nearly all 114 chapters of the Quran begin by introducing God with these qualities; an expression for a Creator who regards life as sacred. There is no justification in the killing of innocent souls. (Quran 17:33). A murder or horrendous crime against one person is considered an assault on humanity while the sparing of one life is sparing the lives of all people (Quran 5:32). The notion of "jihad," or holy war, is a misinterpreted oxymoron that represents the battle the soul must wage to surrender and serve God (Quran 22:78). Capital punishment is discouraged and even suicide is admonished (Quran 2:178 & 4:29). Oppression is deemed to be worse than murder (Quran 2:217). God encourages kindness, tolerance and equitable reconciliation between the faithful who are fighting (24:22, 49:9). The way of Islam is resorting to pardon, forgetting, and forgiving; striving to emulate the attributes of the Most Compassionate (Quran 7:199 & 64:14). Even in the course of justice, patience is advocated instead of revenge: "...if you resort to patience (instead of revenge), it would be better for the patient ones. You shall resort to patience - and your patience is attainable only with God's help" (Quran 16:126-7 & 42:43). The genuine strength of character that yields patience is encouraged in response to every interaction: "Not equal is the good response and the bad response. You shall resort to the nicest possible response. Thus, the one who used to be your enemy, may become your best friend" (Quran 41:34). This conduct is a true test of the unconditional surrender of the soul, the abstention of ego, and the recognition that all dignity belongs to God (Quran 4:139).

Those who claim superiority in the name of their religion or abuse the way of Islam to hurt other faiths are blinded to the light of unity and equality in the Quran: "Surely, those who believe, those who are Jewish, the Christians, and the converts; anyone who believes in God, and believes in the Last Day, and leads a righteous life, will receive their recompense from their Lord. They have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve" (Quran 2:62). The love of God is not reserved for names such as the Protestant, Shi'ite, or Orthodox who remain divided by clinging to an exclusive belief of guaranteed "salvation." God's infinite love flows to the charitable, righteous, benevolent, equitable, and just; those who submit a complete submission (Quran 3:134, 3:76, 5:13, 5:42, 49:9 & 2:208).