

The Pilgrim's Path

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Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims have arrived at the Mount of Arafat, and thousands are on their way, fulfilling life-long dreams as they tread the pilgrim's path. But how might we relate to Pilgrimage from a historic angle, and what is it that sets 'Hajj' apart as an act of worship?

Pilgrimage, as commonly defined, is a journey to a sacred place as an act of devotion, in order to acquire spiritual merit, or as a penance. To Muslims however, pilgrimage, or 'Hajj', gains more importance being one of the five main acts of worship in Islam. By its Islamic definition it signifies: specific acts of worship performed within specific times at specific locations with a specific intention.

Worship is what defines the relationship of people with their Creator. Although there have been various forms of worship within various religions throughout the ages, as well as different rites within a single religion, yet all have one thing in common: their actions do *not* submit to the mind, nor can they be justified by reasoning or logic. As Muslims it is therefore unnecessary, perhaps even wrong, to say for example, that fasting precisely from dawn to sunset is good for the health, or that five daily prayers at prescribed times is an excellent exercise that involves the whole body, etc. Discussing other personal and public benefits might follow, while one forgets the only true reason for all worship: nurturing and strengthening one's allegiance to God. Religious instruction on the other hand, could be studied and discussed, and should be applied with logic and commonsense. One should be aware of the distinction. The validity of acts of worship such as fasting, prayer, and pilgrimage, are not debatable; each is a personal act which lends itself more to conviction than to logic.

The sacrificial offering is the most ancient, and most primitive, of all rites. It was the primary form of worship involving tangible matter; something valuable that was sacrificed amid public ceremony. Prayer, conversely, is the most profound and sophisticated of worship. It is an intimate rather than a public act; a direct spiritual link to the Creator, with or without the involvement of one's body. 'Hajj' or Pilgrimage, is a marriage of both. Hajj is on one hand a

material form of worship, traveling distances towards the 'Kaaba' ('Cube') to perform circumambulation and to stand upon Mount Arafat, while on the other, it attains the height of spirituality in the prolonged state of 'Ihram', enhanced by the realization that one is standing at the focal point for the prayer of Muslims all around the globe. But what exactly is Ihram? Ihram is a state of self-restraint into which believers enter as they commence praying, fasting, or performing pilgrimage, and from which they exit upon completion of these acts of worship. Ihram helps them look inward towards their spirits and attempt elevation towards their Creator without interference or deterrence. That is why their physical appetites, as well as other distractions, are temporarily put aside, and all they do is enact simple motions that boost concentration. 'Ihram' is such a personal state that it begins and ends with one's *intention* to begin or end an act of worship.

The word 'Hajj', in Arabic, means 'purpose' or 'objective', and 'ma-hajja' is a derivative that means 'route' or 'path', (since a certain purpose can only be achieved by pursuing a certain path). God tells us that it was actually Prophet Abraham (peace upon him) who was called upon by Him to build a house for His worship in Mecca, or 'Bakka' as was its ancient name, and it was Prophet Abraham who first taught people to perform the pilgrimage:

*"We set for Abraham the site
Of the House,
(Saying): Do not associate anything with Me (in worship)
And purify my House
For those who are circumambulating,
Or standing, or bowing and prostrating.
And among mankind proclaim the Pilgrimage:
They will come to you on foot
Or mounted on every lean camel
They shall come from deep and distant dwellings,
That they may witness the benefits provided for them
And remember the attributes of God,
Throughout the appointed days*

*Because of the cattle which He has provided for them,
Then eat thereof (of the sacrifice)
And feed the distressed and poverty-stricken.
Then let them cleanse themselves,
Fulfill their vows,
And (again) circumambulate the House."
"Such (O Mohammed is the Pilgrimage) and:
Whoever honors the sacred rites of God
It is best for him in the sight of his Lord... "*

HQ: 22:30-31

The first verse recounts the rituals of Hajj as they were taught to Abraham. With the passage of time, people in Mecca reverted to different forms of idolatry borrowed from adjacent lands and tribes, and placed many idols in and around the cubic house, or 'Kaaba'. Much later, the Kaaba which Abraham had built for the worship of the only true God, was restored to its original pure state by Prophet Mohammed (peace upon him) in January of the year 630. A.D. The second verse addresses him directly.

Although performing the pilgrimage is one of the principal acts of worship in Islam, it is the duty of *only* those who can pursue the path thereto.

*"The first house of worship built for people was that at Bakka
Full of blessing and of Guidance to all.
In it are evident manifestations, the site of Abraham,
And whoever enters it attains security.
People owe God pilgrimage to the House,
-those of them who can pursue the path."*

HQ: 3:97

It is very important to note the condition for those required to perform the pilgrimage: they must have *the ability* to pursue the path. Bearing that in mind, we realize that anyone who is unable to

perform Hajj for any reason, is *not* required to make the attempt. In that aspect appears the beauty of Islam's responsiveness to the different levels of human capabilities: One is *never obligated* to stretch beyond one's means in God's service.

"On no soul does God place a burden greater than it can bear

It acquires what (good) it earns and suffers what (ill) it causes.

HQ: 2:286

The Holy Qur'an mentions this concept five times! This fairness of judgment applies to everything, whether religious or worldly. It is actually an intrinsic characteristic that God's final Message to all mankind be versatile in its adaptability to people all over the world and to human life as it progresses through various stages.

'O ye who believe,

Bow and prostrate

And worship your Lord,

And do good

That ye may prosper.

And strive in His cause

As you ought to strive,

He has chosen you,

And has not imposed in the doctrine

Any hardship upon you.

It is the creed of your father Abraham'

HQ: 22: 77-78.

It is therefore unfortunate indeed that we see examples of rigidity and intolerance within the Muslims themselves. That should not be construed to indicate a deficiency in Islam, but rather a lack of understanding on the part of those individuals, and inefficiency in relating to its teachings.

The words: *"People owe God pilgrimage to the House, -those of them who can pursue the path."* mean the following: Those who wish to perform Hajj should have all reasonable means to do so, including physical ability, safe passage, full expenses and transportation, after having made proper arrangement for dependents left at home. Hajj is not required of one who cannot meet these requirements. One should not make the mistake of comparing the advanced living standards of today to those prevalent almost 1400 years ago, most apparent in the field of transportation and safe passage. Since people are not required to put themselves through hardships beyond what they could naturally attempt, *"On no soul does God place a burden greater than it can bear,"* nor should they sacrifice the responsibility they owe their families, this ultimately *entrusts each person to determine self-obligation, judging oneself by his or her own responsibilities, ability, and means according to prevalent standards.* That is the only way to ensure the successful accomplishment of this endeavor. And an endeavor it is, sought after by hundreds of thousands every year, some of whom might have been saving all their lives to make the trip. Many people however, hesitate to pursue the path, mistakenly believing Hajj to be too complicated. It is not. The confusion might be their own or they might have been bewildered by those who exaggerate the importance of certain optional rites, or hold opinions that present conflicting procedure.

Let us look at the fundamental rites of Hajj. The fundamental rites of Hajj (according to most schools of thought*) are:

1. The state of Ihram: the intention to start (and later the intention to end) the act of worship, made at a certain place and time.
2. Being in Arafat (at any time on the day of Arafat).
3. Circumambulating the Kaaba.
4. Traversing (Sa'i) between Safa and Marwa.

* The Hanafi school says the fundamentals are two: Being in Arafat, and circumambulation of Kaaba. They consider Ihram a Prerequisite, and Sa'i -a Duty.

Here, indeed, we observe the basic simplicity of Hajj: a series of rituals that are easily performed by able-bodied worshippers. They are easily learnt, and often just being in the company of those who are performing the pilgrimage is enough. These are called 'Pillars', or 'Fundamentals,' for together they constitute the basis of Hajj. Omitting any fundamentals *would* invalidate Hajj. The

remaining subordinate rites are either 'duties' (*Wajibat*), to which there are alternatives or expiation when one is unable to perform any of the them- or 'recommended' (*Sunnan*), which are not essential requirements, although meritorious. As was mentioned earlier, the state of Ihram implies that there are many things one must not intentionally do, and these are considered either 'forbidden' (*Muharramat*), which also entail expiation, or 'disapproved of' (*Makroohat*). There are two qualities that set Ihram apart from the other rites. First, it is a prerequisite to them, and second, God requests self-restraint of the highest order during Ihram:

*"For Hajj are the months well known
If anyone intends that duty therein,
Let there be no obscenity, nor deviation
Nor argument in the Hajj,
And whatever good you do God knows it.
And do take provision (for the journey)-
For the best of provision is Heedfulness (Taqwa),
And be Heedful of Me, O ye that are wise"*

HQ: 2:197

It is of utmost importance to note here that pervading connotations, when misused, cause people to hold mistaken beliefs and ideologies. Hence, the wrongful meaning that the word 'Ihram' brings to many minds. Most people would agree that one's clothing is of far less importance than one's conduct, yet many people these days associate 'Ihram' with clothing (*wearing 'Ihram'*), more than with intention and self-restraint that should keep us from even falling into argument! These white un-sewn garments men wear –though recommended garments for them- are not of the fundamentals, and lacking them would not invalidate Ihram or Hajj.

References:

1. Islamic Jurisprudence: 'Fiqh based on the Four Schools of Thought', jurors state in the book of Hajj 'Wearing stitched garments during Ihram is forbidden 'muharram', which entails expiation but does not invalidate Ihram or Hajj.

2. In Sahih Muslim, Book of Hajj, Hadith 2648 the Prophet Muhammad (peace upon him) is reported to have discussed what a 'Muhrim,' or person (male) undertaking Ihram should *not* wear, such as a shirt, turban, stockings, trousers, or perfumed fabric. Then Hadith 2650 reports the Prophet as saying, "So far as trousers 'sirwal' are concerned, one may wear them who does not find lower garment 'izar'; as also thick socks 'khuff', he may wear them who does not find sandals 'na'lein.'" (Sirwals are similar to very baggy trousers.)

Ihram, therefore, is the height of spirituality for the duration of worship, and *not* two pieces of white cloth worn exclusively by male pilgrims. God's most valuable gift to us is the mind, and the pursuit and proper application of knowledge is our lifelong duty.

"And among His signs:

The creation of the heavens and the earth

And the variations in your languages and your color,

Verily in that are signs

For those who know.

And among His signs

Your sleep by night.

And the day,

And your quest (for livelihood) of His bounty

Verily in that are signs

For those who have knowledge"

HQ: 30:22

Having observed Hajj from a novel perspective, it remains to be stated that one should not postpone the turning of a new leaf in life, relying on Hajj to be the reason for absolution of sins in which one has wronged one's own soul. God's forgiveness is granted whenever and wherever it is sincerely sought, and there are no barriers between Himself and His servants, so much so, that in the following verse God answers His servants directly without using the word "Say":

"And when My servants ask you (O Mohammed) about me,

I am indeed close;

Responding to the prayer of every suppliant when he calls on Me

Let them therefore respond to My call

And believe in Me

That they might follow the right way."

HQ: 2:186

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