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Meaning and Accomplishment as Components of Wellbeing: A Study of Psychological Theories in the Light of Islamic Teachings

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Abstract

Meaningfulness and Accomplishment are two of the major components of life, which contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and societies. Social psychologists as well as thinkers from all generations have come up with benefits of having purpose in life and accomplishments along the way. Another tangent to these studies is the teachings of Islam, which not only focus on having a purposeful life and accomplishing the ultimate goal, but also they provide concrete and practical guidelines through which one can attain these components for the benefit of not only this worldly life but for the hereafter as well. This article analyzes these two components in the light of The Holy Qur'ān and *Sunnah*, and furnishes a framework for leading a purposeful, well accomplished life. The basic methodology used in this article is qualitative, and a comparison is drawn out between the Islamic and contemporary aspects of Meaning and Accomplishment, by citing examples from the life of the Prophet (SAW), his companions, and those who followed in their footsteps. The results show the undoubted supremacy of Islam in providing practical examples and implementation of both the elements of the PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) Model.

Keywords: Qur'ān, *Sunnah*, Accomplishment, Meaning, Positive psychology

Introduction

Positive Psychology is a new and upcoming field, which according to Dr. Seligman plays a pivotal role in the wellbeing of normal people when their life seems barren and meaningless. Having meaning in life and accomplishing that which makes a difference in the society are two essential components of the wellbeing theory proposed by Dr. Martin Seligman, known to be the father of positive psychology.¹

Seligman has proposed his theory in the form of a model, which he believes, if practiced will result in the wellbeing of individuals and societies. He calls it the PERMA Model of wellbeing; PERMA being the acronym for Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. In this article we discuss the implementation of the two components of Meaning and Accomplishment in the light of Islamic teachings,

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giving illustrious examples from the life of the Prophet (SAW), his companions and later generations.

1.1 Literature Review

Much has been written and researched regarding these two components of life. Victor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*² was the first to float the importance of having a purpose in life. Lopez's *Handbook of Positive Psychology*³ discusses thoroughly the various facets of purposefulness. Seneca's *On the Shortness of Life*⁴ is probably the first book that suggests the importance of use of time. Walter Mischel in *The Marshmallow Test: Why Self-Control is the Engine of Success*⁵ gives a thorough analysis of the lifelong study of deferred gratification. *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*⁶ by Albert Bandura gives a good insight into this important character trait. Philip Dow, in *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development*⁷ speaks on tenacity and its extent and importance in life. Michael Hart, the author of *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*⁸ has provided a unique list of people whose accomplishments are a role model for all others, it was those who lived meaningful lives and put their time to best use.

In *Character Strengths Matter: How to Live a Full Life*,⁹ Shannon Polly and Kathryn Britton elaborate upon the positive effects of remembering past accomplishments without getting into the realm of arrogance. *Flourish*¹⁰ by Martin Seligman gives an understanding of the parameters of happiness and wellbeing set by the author himself in PERMA model. *Flourish* discusses Dr. Seligman's work on optimism, motivation, and character to determine how to make life more productive. The book elaborates on how the PERMA components are essential for long lasting satisfaction and fulfillment in life.

In *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*¹¹ Dacher Keltner ponders over the positive evolutionary instincts, such as awe, gratitude and compassion, and says that they will be rendered meaningless if humans were intrinsically bound to live lives filled

²Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Beacon Press, 2006).

³Shane Lopez, *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴Lucius Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

⁵Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test: Why Self-Control is the Engine of Success* (New York: Brown Spark, 2015).

⁶Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: Worth Publishers, 1997).

⁷Phillip Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013).

⁸Michael Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History* (New York: Citadel, 2000).

⁹Shannon Polly, and Kathryn Britton, *Character Strengths Matter: How to Live a Full Life* (New York: Positive Psychology News, 2015).

¹⁰Martin Seligman, *Flourish* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2013).

¹¹Dacher Keltner, *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2009).

with negativity. Another book by Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*,¹² the developer of the PERMA model reflects upon his theories in a simple, easy and understandable manner, giving a peep into his “science of happiness.”

From Islamic point of view the works of Ibn al Qayyim such as *Minhāj al Qasideen* are remarkable in understanding the needs of the soul, the remedies of its negativities and requirements of it wellbeing.¹³ In *Dealing With Worries and Stress*,¹⁴ Sheikh Muhammad bin Saleh al Munajjid gives the spiritual perspective of positivity. *Islam: A Psychology of Ease or Difficulty?*¹⁵ by Abdel Rahman Mussa discusses the Positivity of the Prophets in the most adverse situations, which in turn leads to the success of their mission. *Psychology from the Islamic Perspective*¹⁶ by Dr. Ayesha Utz is an effort to expound upon the conceptualization of human psychology based upon the Qur’ān and *Sunnah*. She also includes specific references to scientific research that correspond to, and build upon, what is already known from revelation.

1.2 Western Perspective of Meaning

Regarding “meaning in life” it was Victor Frankl who first proposed the idea that humans cannot function well without a purposeful life. He substantiated his argument by giving the example of the mental ailments after the Second World War. He claimed that the main reason of the rising of psychological issues was purposelessness, which was resulting in a meaningless life.

He was of the view that suffering cannot be completely avoided, but we can try to look for a deeper meaning in all the painful events. Doing so will help in moving on with a purposeful life. At the core of his theory, which he called the “logo therapy” is the firm belief that humans are primarily driven by purpose rather than pleasure. During his years as a prisoner in the Nazi camps, he noticed that the prisoners who had a purpose, a sense of meaning, and something to look forward to on the outside were most likely to survive. He said that striving for meaning, not pleasure or power, is ultimately what keeps human beings going.¹⁷

Knowing the purpose of being sent in this world and having a goal in our lives is an essential element for feeling happy and content in our lives. We have an actual purpose in our lives as opposed to a routine, which is exhaustive and pressured, only focused on acquiring material wealth, without any time for leisure or contemplation. Realizing this

¹²Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

¹³Ibn al Qayyim, *Minhāj Al Qasideen* trans., Sulayman Kailani (Lahore: Idara Ma’arif e Islami, 2008).

¹⁴Saleh al Munajjid, *Dealing with Worries and Stress* (U.K.: Dar as Sunnah, 2003).

¹⁵Abdel Rahman Mussa, *Islam: A Psychology of Ease or Difficulty?* (California: Smashwords, 2012).

¹⁶Ayesha Utz, *Psychology from the Islamic Perspective* (Jeddah: IIPH, 2011).

¹⁷Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 51-59.

purpose in life helps individuals by providing them with the belief that there is a higher meaning to life.¹⁸ Throughout history, one of mankind's main worries was to set up such organizations, practices and convictions that provide the motivation for a fulfilling future, and an in-depth understanding of lives. Research upon this purpose of life is concerned with studying the steps, which guide towards mankind's recognition of purpose and understanding in their lives. The definition of having a meaning in life has been described as, "the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission or over-arching aim in life."¹⁹ Studies have also indicated that religious people have a higher consciousness of the meaning of life.²⁰

There are two essential features required for having a meaning in life: the origin from which they derive this meaning and the extent these individuals are willing to go to in this quest for meaning.²¹ Studies conducted to determine the highest cause of providing meaning in life show that relationships rank at the top, both when subjects were asked to rate from a list, or inquired personally.²²

Another major aspect of having meaning in life is to have a sense of responsibility towards how to spend time. It was identified by the Roman Philosopher, Lucius Annaeus Seneca two thousand years ago, that it is not that we have a short life span; rather we waste a lot of time. A sufficient generous amount has been granted to us for highest achievements, provided that it was well invested. However, when it is wasted in heedless luxuries and spent on no good activities, we are faced at last by death to realize that life has passed away before we knew that it was passing. Seneca argues that time is our most valuable resource, yet we squander it as if it were in unlimited supply.²³ He says that people are frugal in guarding their personal property, but as soon as it comes to wastefulness of time, they are most extravagant of the one thing in which it is right to be miserly.²⁴

Recent research has found that the spending time in meaningless pursuit of happiness adversely affects the wellbeing, and people end up being lonely facing purposeless life. Leading a meaningful life, and looking for a purpose of existence begets durable and authentic wellbeing.²⁵

¹⁸Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 42.

¹⁹Lopez, *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 32.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³Seneca, *On the Shortness of Life*, 54.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵Tori DeAngelis, "In Search of Meaning," *Monitor on Psychology* 49, no. 9 (October 2018): 38-44. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2018/10/cover-search-meaning>

1.3 Western Perspective of Accomplishment

In addition to leading a meaningful life, accomplishments in life are also essential in order to push a person to thrive and flourish. Accomplishment is often pursued for its own sake, even when it brings no positive emotion, no meaning, and nothing in the way of positive relationships. So the wellbeing theory requires the element of accomplishment in its momentary form, as well as a life dedicated to accomplishment for the sake of accomplishment, in its extended form.²⁶

Accomplishment is to excel in all fields of life, whether academic, social or career related and gaining satisfaction and contentment in return. According to Seligman, “an accomplished child or youth is elected leader in the friendship club, and reads a book because he is curious about a subject... he studies for a test because he wants to do well, writes a letter because he misses his aunt... acts brave because others are counting on him, and teaches tolerance because he empathizes with the sting of unfair treatment.” Accomplishment therefore helps in eradicating confusions, discouragement, loneliness, and uncertainties. The accomplishment that begets success requires following.

1.3.1 Deferred Gratification

Deferred or delayed gratification, describes the process that a person experiences when he resists the temptation of an instant reward while preferring a larger and superior later reward.²⁷ The ability to delay gratification leads to academic success, physical and psychological health, and social competence. For example, students who learn to delay gratification are better able to complete their assignments on time.²⁸ The groundbreaking research on delayed gratification, famously known as “Marshmallow Experiment” containing the message, “small reward now, bigger reward later” clearly demonstrated that children who resisted the marshmallow for a little while for two at the end were more successful in life throughout.²⁹

1.3.2 Self-Efficacy

The belief that one has the capability of accomplishing a certain task is pivotal for success. Self-efficacy is the belief that you can accomplish what you want to accomplish. Knowing ones inner strengths, being determined and persevering in hard times help people to deal with the hurdles, which are hindering the achievement of a certain goal.

²⁶Martin Seligman, *Flourish*, 19.

²⁷Kelly Mc Gonigal, *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why it Matters, and What You Can do to Get More of it* (New York: Avery, 2013), 32.

²⁸Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test: Why Self-Control is the Engine of Success* (New York: Brown Spark, 2015), 123.

²⁹Noah Shamosh, “Individual Differences in Delay Discounting: Relation to Intelligence, Working Memory, And Anterior Prefrontal Cortex,” *Psychological Science* 19, no. 9 (September 2008): 904-11. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02175.x.

1.3.3 Tenacity

In both our actions and our thinking habits, tenacity is often the difference between success and failure; fulfillment and frustration. Intellectual tenacity begets the reward in the form of achievement in spite of all the hurdles, and nothing is more rejuvenating than the emotions that accompany the reward. The inventor Thomas Edison is said to have remarked, “genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.”³⁰

Past accomplishment benefits in weaker stages of life, giving hope and keeping the person positive when things are getting rough. Accomplishment and reflecting on accomplishments therefore builds positivity and generates gratitude. When an achievement is once gained, it cannot be undone; the legacy lives on even after the person dies. Savoring accomplishments thus becomes a source of individual or collective wellbeing.³¹

Both these components are a vital source of positivity and wellbeing. A meaningless life without any accomplishments is deemed a waste of life in every religion, ideology, or culture. Now we shall explore the examples of these two components from the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (SAW) and see the parameters that have been set by Allah and the Prophet (SAW) in this regard.

1.4 The Islamic Standpoint of Meaning

It has been mentioned earlier that “Meaning” can be achieved by the following two approaches: (1) Victor Frankl’s “Purpose in life”, (2) Seneca’s “Use of time.” The Islamic relevant terms for these two approaches are discussed below, along with their significance and concrete real life examples.

1.4.1 Purpose in Life

From the Islamic point of view, every creation of Allah has a purpose. In fact it is a sign of wisdom to realize that everything in this universe has been created with a purpose. It is only the wise that can fathom the deeper and substantial meaning in the creation of the Universe and the creation of man as a vicegerent of Allah on this planet.³² Allah has mentioned in the Qur’ān on multiple occasions that heavens and the earth and all that is in between them have not been created meaninglessly: “And We did not create the heavens and earth and that between them in play. We did not create them except in truth, but most of them do not know.”³³ Scholars say that creating everything in truth refers to the purpose of each creation.³⁴

³⁰Philip Dow, *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2013), 39.

³¹Shannon Polly, Kathryn Britton, *Character Strengths Matter: How to Live A Full Life* (New York: Positive Psychology News, 2015), 155.

³²āl e Imrān, 3:190-191.

³³ad Dukhān 44:38-39.

³⁴Ibn Kathīr, *Tafseer Al Qur’ān Al Azeem* (Riyadh, Darussalam: 2008), 5/56.

Regarding the purpose of man's life on this earth, Allah has repetitively asked the question that does man think that he has been created without a purpose?³⁵ Or that he will be left unrestricted?³⁶ So the question arises that what is this purpose? The answer lies in the strong and clear verses of Surah Al Mulk,³⁷ Surah Al Kahf,³⁸ and Surah Al Dhariāt;³⁹ All these verses clearly give the message that the purpose of man's earthly life is to test him to know which ones of them perform the most excellent and righteous actions, while remaining subservient to Allah.

Therefore, it is clear from the above Verses that a man has a purpose to fulfill and the ultimate purpose of man's creation is to do good deeds. The question arises that what are the good deeds that would be acceptable in the Eyes of Allah and what higher purpose will those good deeds serve? The answer again lies in the Qur'ān. As for the good deeds, the benchmark is firstly to perform them with *Ikhhlās* i.e. purely for the Sake and Pleasure of Allah and secondly they should be in accordance with the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Regarding the higher purpose that will be fulfilled through the good deeds, Allah says that whoever is drawn away from Fire and admitted to *Jannah* is the one who has attained the ultimate purpose of life.⁴⁰

Hence the fundamental and final purpose of this life according to the Qur'ān is to protect oneself from the Hellfire and enter Paradise. This purpose is so noble and elevated that it produces legendary figures like Abu Bakr (RA) and Umar (RA). The extent to which they can strive for this higher purpose is mentioned in the Qur'an as selling themselves to gain the Pleasure of Allah.⁴¹

On the contrary, there are people who are driven in life by instant gratification, which has its outcomes and effects on their personalities. Tyrants like the Pharaoh and Abu Jahl are the products of such basic purpose of life. Their psychic is that they are content upon this worldly life, and do not pay heed to the Signs of Allah.⁴² Furthermore, they prioritize this life over the Hereafter and say that it is just the passage of time that changes the situations in our lives, and we shall have no other life.⁴³

Hence, a person's purpose determines his worldly lifestyle. His ultimate wellbeing is dependent upon his goals and his outlook towards life. And since Islam takes into account both the lives, i.e. this world and the Hereafter, therefore it addresses the wellbeing of both the worlds.

³⁵al Mu'minūn 23:115.

³⁶al Qiyamah 75:36.

³⁷al Mulk 67:1.

³⁸al Kahf 18:7.

³⁹al Dhariāt 51:56.

⁴⁰Aal e Imrān 3:185.

⁴¹al Baqarah 2:207.

⁴²Yunus 10:7-8.

⁴³Al Jathiya 45:24-25.

1.4.2 Use of Time

Perhaps the most impactful chapter of the Qur'ān is *Surah al Asr*. Imam Shaf'i, a jurist and traditional scholar of Islam, said that if God had revealed only this *Surah* it would be enough for giving a direction to all of mankind. It abridges the basic message of the Qur'ān, declaring that if one followed its advice, it would be enough for him to lead a successful life in this world and in the Hereafter.⁴⁴ The message of this *Surah* is loud and clear: make use of your time or else you are heading towards bankruptcy. The question arises, which usage of time can save mankind from the incredible loss mentioned in this *Surah*? The answer also lies in the same *Surah*: "By time, indeed, human race is in loss, except those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience."⁴⁵

The outcome of this *Surah* can be seen in the life of the Prophet (SAW) his companions and the earlier scholars of Islam. They knew that time cannot be stopped, hoarded or loaned; and that the only way to salvation is to use the given time productively. The 84600 seconds that every person is given at the beginning of the day is his investment. Intelligent is the one who uses it in constructive activities. It is said about Ibn al Qayyim that he wrote over one thousand books. He used to save the wooden relics of his pens, and when he died, they were so many that they were burnt for heating the water for his bathing, and still some remained.⁴⁶ There is no concept of wasting or killing time in Islam and similarly no concept of having nothing to do.

The struggle of the man against his time is like the one who is trying to sell ice. It is melting away and he needs to sell it quickly before his day ends. Imam Razi has cited a scholar as saying that he was able to comprehend the meaning of *Surah Al- 'Asr* from an ice-seller; he was desperately calling out to sell his ice, pleading for mercy because all his investment was literally melting away. Upon hearing him the scholar deciphered that *Wal-asri innal-insana la-fi khusrin* is referring to the passing of the allotted time of man on this earth. If life is wasted, or exhausted in vain pursuits, it will be a sheer loss to man. Thus, swearing an oath by the time, this *Surah* means that the fast passing time is a witness to the fact that if man's activities are void of the four qualities mentioned in this *Surah*, then he is engaged in bad bargains; only such people are engaged in good bargains, who work in the world, characterized by these four qualities.⁴⁷ The four characteristics being:

1. Those who believed
2. And performed righteous deeds
3. And advised each other to truth

⁴⁴Abul A'la Maudūdi, *Tafheem al Qur'ān* (Lahore: Idara Tarjuman ul Qur'ān, 1991), 6/448.

⁴⁵Al Asr 103:1-3.

⁴⁶Ibn al Qayyim, *Minhāj Al Qasideen*, trans., Sulaiman Kailani (Lahore: Idara Ma'arif e Islami, 2008), 16.

⁴⁷Maudūdi, *Tafheem al Qur'ān*, 6/449.

4. And advised each other to patience

1.4.2.1 *Surah An Nasr: A Guide towards Use of Time*

In *Surah An Nasr*, Allah commands the believers to engage in productive tasks one after the other.⁴⁸ Scholars have deduced following four points from this *Surah*. Once you have performed your assigned tasks, then get involved in some other duty that Allah has prescribed for you

1. Once you are free from *Jihād* worship Allah Almighty.
2. When you have performed prayer, then make *dua*
3. When you have performed your worldly duties then worship Almighty Allah.

Imam Jassās states that all these inferences may be driven from the Verse of *Surah An Nasr*. Although apparently, it is the Messenger of Allah (SAW) who is being commanded to act in this manner, but it is meant for all believers. The Verse gives a clear concept of time management and planning. The believers should keep themselves engaged in a variety of productive activities in order to avoid any pressure of work and monotony.⁴⁹

1.4.2.2 *Avoid Vain talk and Activities*

The life of a believer is void of useless activities. In mentioning the characteristics of the successful people, Allah says: “And those who avoid vain talk.”⁵⁰ A person, who has led a heedless life, wasted his time in fun and recreation only, is bound to regret. He would plead to go back in the world and make use of time.⁵¹

1.4.2.3 *Do not waste time*

People who waste their time in heedlessness and play, discussing the weather, the rising of prices, and the political scenarios are basically wasting their most precious investment, i.e. time. Allah has mentioned this sorrow state of affairs of the people in *Surah Al Anbiya*.⁵² The characteristic mentioned in these Verses of the neglectful and reckless people, is wastage of time. The time of their reckoning is approaching whereas they are indulging in play and non-serious activities, instead of indulging in that which will benefit them on the final Day of Judgment.

1.4.2.4 *Time is very Limited*

The limited time period that man has been granted on this earth is literally his capital for investment. Qur’ān at multiple occasions mentions the expression *bima kanū ya’malūn*, i.e., people will be rewarded or punished because of what they had been doing in their

⁴⁸Ash Sharh 94:7-8.

⁴⁹Abu Bakr Al Jassās, *Ahkām Al Qur’ān*, trans., Maulana Abdul Qayyum (Islamabad: Sharī‘ah Academy, 1999), 6/679.

⁵⁰Al Muminūn 23:3.

⁵¹Al Muminūn 23:99-100.

⁵²Al Anbiya, 21:1-2.

worldly life. Man will be questioned thoroughly and asked to give an account of how he spent his life; how he spent his youth in particular; how he earned and spent his wealth; and to what use did he put the knowledge that he had gained.⁵³ Thus people will be held accountable for everything they have been indulging in; everything that they have been spending their time in.

1.4.2.5 *The two overlooked blessings*

According to a Hadīth the Prophet (SAW) said that health and free time are the two blessings, which people tend to be heedless of, and waste them in their ignorance of their importance.⁵⁴

1.4.2.6 *How to make the best use of time*

The Prophet (SAW) also suggested how to make use of time in a narration where he related the excellence of Islam with abandoning those activities, which do not concern him.⁵⁵

Hence the “meaning” in life of a believer is very profound and makes him productive for himself as well as his surroundings and is also a source of his salvation in the Hereafter.

A keen look at the daily routine of the Prophet (SAW) reveals that he made the best use of his time. However, he did not follow a regimental routine. He adapted each day according to the needs and tasks at hand. Nevertheless, his days were structured, mostly revolving around prayer times and never was a moment ‘wasted’ or not utilized at its best. How did the Prophet (SAW) achieve so much in a short span of twenty-three years, that fourteen hundred years later, with the biggest technological revolutions, he still remains unmatched and unsurpassed?

Michael Hart, the author of “*The Hundred*” writes: “My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world’s most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels.”⁵⁶

He was supremely successful because he made the best use of his time. Every moment was accounted for, every moment was being invested, as Ayesha (RA), his wife said, “he remembered Allah all the times”⁵⁷

Hence the Prophet (SAW) was an epitome of meaningful life; whereas Frankl’s “purpose” therapy, and Seneca’s “use of time” doctrine only gives some theoretical insights

⁵³Muhammad b. Isa Tirmidhi, *Jami’ Tirmidhi*, 2416.

⁵⁴Muhammad b. Ismail Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, 6412.

⁵⁵Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 1737.

⁵⁶Michael Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History* (New York: Citadel, 2000), 3.

⁵⁷Imam Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, 373.

into meaningfulness. The teachings of the Qur'ān and the practical concrete examples from the Prophet's (SAW) life leave no ambiguity in guiding towards the best purpose of life, the most beneficial usage of time thus directing the believer towards the most meaningful life.

1.5 The Islamic Standpoint of Accomplishment: *Al Fawz*

It was mentioned that the “accomplishment” component of life requires deferred gratification, self-efficacy, and tenacity. In this segment these three basic elements of Accomplishment shall be discussed in the light of the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*.

1.5.1 Deferred Gratification

The concept of *Ākhirah* (The Hereafter) is all about deferred gratification. Those who are able to delay their fulfillment and indulgence in this world will reap great rewards in the Hereafter. Those who want all their desires to be fulfilled in this world get only what Allah has ordained for them, and they will have no share of reward in the Hereafter. As for those believers who desire the Hereafter, and work for it, they will be appreciated by Allah and rewarded immensely.⁵⁸

1.5.1.1 *Ājilah and Ākhirah*

It is interesting to note that Allah has named the *dunya* as *ājilah* in the above verse. *Ājilah* is from “ajal”, which in its essence means hastiness and impulsiveness. This asserts that every accomplishment of this world is eventually instant gratification. And those who can wait and delay their gratification till the Hereafter are the ones who actually are the most accomplished people. The verse sheds light on the fact that those who prefer instant gratification over deferred are the ones who transgress in this world. So even if they accomplish much, it is at the expense of the Hereafter. Since they cannot look beyond this world, they strive to gain whatever this life has to offer by any means whether lawful or unlawful.

1.5.1.2 *Better but later*

Another Verse states the attractions of this world and Allah has stated the “better but later” phenomenon clearly. Allah has mentioned the six major categories of most sought after adornments of this world in *Aal e Imran*: women, sons, heaps of gold and silver, branded horses, cattle and ploughed land.⁵⁹ Since the love for these adornments are embedded in the human nature, therefore two types of people emerged in relation to them. One is the type whose efforts are intended only towards these adornments of life. Their thoughts, actions, and scope are dictated by and limited to these attractions. In doing so, they forget the higher purpose of life. The other type is of those people who benefit from these adornments in this world but do not take them as their ultimate accomplishment. They

⁵⁸Al Isra, 17:19-20.

⁵⁹Aal e Imran, 2:14.

are very clear about the fact that Allah has called the adornments of this world *Mata'ul hayatid dunya*, and they believe that this life is basically a way to attain *Jannah*, the ultimate accomplishment.⁶⁰

1.5.1.3 *Negative effects of instant gratification*

Another explicit verse in the Qur'ān talks about the negative effects of instant gratification on the personality. Such a person loses all connection with Allah His Message and His Remembrance. The believers are commanded to avoid the company of people whose all efforts have one purpose only: to attain the glitter of this world.⁶¹

1.5.1.4 *The greatest losers*

In *Surah Al Kahf*, Allah labels those people as the greatest losers, whose efforts were confined to the gains of this worldly life only and they didn't even realize that there something wrong with their thinking. It seemed to them that whatever they were doing was the best. Such are the people whose actions will become worthless and insignificant in the Hereafter, no matter how much hard work was put into them.⁶² Every effort and struggle they made was for this worldly life will end up with zero accomplishment in the Hereafter.

1.5.1.5 *The Rewards of Deferred Gratification*

In the teachings of the Prophet (SAW) it is clearly demonstrated that he strived to teach the people about the ill effects of instant gratification and at the same time he would make people realize the rewards of delayed gratification. When an epileptic woman came to him to ask him to supplicate to Allah for her to cure her ailment, he gave her two options: instant gratification, i.e. I will supplicate and you will be cured; or deferred gratification, i.e. you stay epileptic in this life and be rewarded in the next life; and the woman opted for the latter.⁶³

Now this woman's desire of ridding of epilepsy was not wrong, nor is it forbidden in Islam to invoke Allah for removal of afflictions, but the Prophet (SAW) wanted to set high standards and examples for those to come. She is now gone, her illness finished, but her mention remains as a person who preferred the delayed gratification of the highest level over instant gratification of getting well. No matter how genuine her desire was, she still preferred the Hereafter, and this level of exercising constraint upon oneself is only possible with *Jannah* in mind.

1.5.1.6 *Comparison of worldly life and Jannah*

⁶⁰Abdul Rahman Sa'di, *Ta'seer Alkareem Alrahman Fi Tafseer Kalām Al Mannān* (Cairo: Dar al Hadith, 2005), 117.

⁶¹An Najm 53:19-20.

⁶²Al Kahf 18:103-105.

⁶³Muhammad b. Ismail, *Sahih Bukhari*, 5652.

The Prophet said: “By Allah, this world is so insignificant in comparison to the Hereafter that if one of you should dip his forefinger in the ocean and then he should see as to what has stuck to it.”⁶⁴ To one of his great companions Abdullah ibn Umar (RA), he advised to live in this world as a stranger or a traveler, and to consider oneself among those who have already passed away.⁶⁵

1.5.1.7 *The Ultimate Benefit of Deferred Gratification*

The Prophet (SAW) said that being entirely focused on the worldly life creates confusions and fear of being impoverished, and yet the person only attains that which has been ordained for him. Whereas the person whose main focus is the Hereafter, Allah will remove his confusions, and grant him contentment even if he has suffered a loss, and he will be given provision in this world as well.⁶⁶

The above narrations might give the impression that Islam is completely opposed to having any interest in this world and focus only on the *Ākhirah*. On the contrary, history has proven that it was this generation of the illiterate Bedouins who became the leaders, the educators and the scientists of the world. This phenomenal accomplishment and success was achieved by practicing the teachings of the Prophet (SAW). The intelligent concept of *Alfawz* makes “accomplishment” appears to be a mundane worldly view. Thus Islam allows all types of *halāl* entertainments and recreations, however, never at the cost of *Ākhira*.

1.5.2 Self Efficacy

It is said that *ma'rifah* معرفة الذات is to perceive a thing by reflection and by considering the effect thereof on the mind and senses.⁶⁷ Therefore it refers to be able to perceive ones qualities, to have understanding of the self; to have a distinct and specific knowledge of oneself; highest and most elevated faculties of discernment⁶⁸

As mentioned earlier, self-efficacy is basically a belief of “I can.” Islam takes this element of accomplishment to a level that is unthought-of. Allah says in *Surah Al Anfāl* that twenty believers will overcome two hundred of the nonbelievers; and hundred steadfast believers will overpower one thousand disbelievers. This is the power of faith.⁶⁹

1.5.2.1 *We don't win by numbers*

It is a historical fact that when the Muslims believed in this Verse, they overcame the powers that were far greater than them. In the battle of Mu'ttah the Muslims were three thousand in number whereas the Byzantines were one hundred thousand and some other Arab tribes also joined the army of Heraclius and the number reached two hundred

⁶⁴Imam Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, 2858.

⁶⁵Ibn Majah, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 4114.

⁶⁶Ibid., 4105.

⁶⁷Edward Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863), 2014.

⁶⁸Raghib Isphahani, *Mufradat al Qur'ān* (Lahore: Islamic Academy, n.d.), 238.

⁶⁹al Anfāl 8:65.

thousand. One of the companions said to a newly revert Muslim who was gazing at the Roman army wide eyed: “You should have witnessed us in Badar we did not attain victory by numbers.”⁷⁰ The belief that “we don’t win by numbers” was instilled as self-efficacy in the Muslims.

1.5.2.2 *Self-efficacy of Prophet Yusuf*

The story of Yusuf is a clear proof of the fact that people who know their worth and develop the characteristic of self-efficacy reach the levels of accomplishments, which would not have been reached otherwise. He knew he could manage the grain of Egypt like no other man in the land, he therefore offered his services due to his self-efficacy that he was able to protect the grain and also had knowledge of how to manage through the years of drought.

1.5.3 Tenacity

Determination is one of the most important traits of a believer. A believer never loses his passion and commitment; troubles don’t limit him and he continues with his efforts. Allah tests the tenacity of a believer from time to time. This fact has been revealed in the Qur’an that people will be tested with fear, hunger, loss of life, property, and crops. Those who remain patient in these dire circumstances receive good tidings from Allah, and are the one who are rightly guided.⁷¹

1.5.3.1 *Determination of the Prophets*

Allah praises the determination of the previous Prophets and their followers in the Qur’an: “. . .they never lost heart if they met with disaster in God's way, nor did they weaken (in will) nor give in. And God loves those who are firm and steadfast...”⁷²

1.5.3.2 *Lack of commitment is a sign of hypocrisy*

Allah declared at the time of the Battle of Tabūk that believers will never seek exemption from their religious duties, no matter how tough they may be. It is the characteristic of either the disbelievers or the hypocrites.⁷³

1.5.3.3 *The Battle of Khandaq: Epitome of tenacity*

A great example of tenacity of the Prophet (SAW) and the *Sahaba* was seen in the life of the Prophet (SAW) in the Battle of Khandaq. The test was so great that the Qur’an testifies itself that when all the allied forces laid siege upon the believers, it was a time of great test. The believers thought of this test as Allah’s promise coming true and it increased them in determination.⁷⁴ The digging of the trench was an accomplishment that actually

⁷⁰Ibn Hisham, *As Seerah an Nabawiyya* (Cairo: Dar al Kitab Arabi, 1990), 3/429-438.

⁷¹al Baqarah 2: 155.

⁷²Aal e Imrān 3: 146-147.

⁷³at Tawbah, 9: 45.

⁷⁴Al Ahzāb, 33: 22-23.

became the turning point in history. The Prophet (SAW) said after the battle was over: "From now on they will not attack you rather you will attack them."⁷⁵

The digging of the trench is height of all the characteristics required for accomplishment, i.e. deferred gratification, self-efficacy and tenacity. The Prophet (SAW) agreed to the novel idea, planned, organized and executed it, and were miraculously ready when the enemy arrived. The Prophet (SAW) himself worked along with the companions, his chest covered in dust, his abdomen tied up with stones to suppress hunger. Tenacity thus, sometimes becomes a check of a believer's faith, whereas procrastination and lethargy are deemed as the characteristics of hypocrisy.

1.5.3.4 *The Unique Tenacity of the Muhadditheen*

Later in the history of Muslim scholarship one comes across the unique example of tenacity; *Rihla* (travels) of the *Muhaddithin* (Hadith scholars) for collection and verification of Hadith of the Prophet (SAW). Imam Bukhari travelled from Bukhara to Makkah and from there he went to Syria, Egypt, Kufa, Baghdad, Basra and Nishapur.⁷⁶ Imam Nasa'i travelled at the age of fifteen to Hijaz, Iraq, Jaza'ir, Khurasan and Baghdad to learn from the scholars of his time.⁷⁷ There were scholars of Hadith who were known as *Mufliseen fi Talab il Hadith* They were those who suffered during their travels. These travels were physically strenuous and financially burdensome. So much so that some of them travelled hundreds of miles with just one *dirham* in their pockets. The famous Hadith scholar Yahya bin Ma'een inherited one million *dirhams* from his father and spent it all in his travels for learning Hadith.⁷⁸ The famous Companion Jabir bin Abdullah travelled to Syria from Madinah just to verify one Hadith from another Companion.⁷⁹

It was this determination, tenacity, and steadfastness on the part of the Hadith scholars that Hadith was collected, written, and verified. The sciences of Hadith developed and evolved by these scholars are most academic and unparalleled in any field of education even today.

2. Conclusion

The above discussion points towards the fact that positive psychology and Islam are inherently intertwined. The theories proposed by social psychologists have long been discussed and applied in the lives of the Prophet (SAW) and his noble companions. Studying the Qur'an and *Sunnah* makes a person most positive, and headed towards a meaningful life, accomplishing that which pleases his Lord. Thus reaping rewards in this world as well as the hereafter. Much as we give credit to Dr. Seligman for all his efforts,

⁷⁵Muhammad b. Ismail, *Sahih Bukhari*, 4109.

⁷⁶Ibn Hajar Asqalani, "Al Muqaddimah," *Fath Al Bari Fi Sharh Sahih Al Bukhari* (Cairo: Dar al Rayyan, 1988).

⁷⁷al Dhahabi, *Siyar A'lam Al Nubala* (Beirut: Musasa al Rasalah, 1992), 11/197.

⁷⁸Ibid., 8/117.

⁷⁹Ibid., 3/191.

as he has truly touched the inherent *fitrah* of the humans and gathered the essence of the character strengths, which contribute in the wellbeing of individuals and societies. However, since he does not take “God” into account, and believes that it is evolution that is responsible for inclining man towards these traits, the examples, and implementation of the PERMA Model given by him are few, restricted and somewhat superficial. Whereas we see that Islam provides solid outline for implementation of Meaning and Accomplishment, as well as all other components of the PERMA Model. The concept of the Hereafter brings out the best and most positive traits in a believer.

In fact Islam cannot be confined to one model, as it takes a believer to the tangents of positivity, productivity, meaningfulness and accomplishment, which are unconceivable in any other theoretical ideologies.

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