CHAPTER 1

The Spiritual Anchor: Finding Meaning and Mental Well-being

1. The Spiritual Crisis of Modernity

Modern life presents a paradox that lies at the heart of *When Progress Is Not Enough*. Human beings possess forms of comfort, mobility, information, and technological power that would have been unimaginable to earlier generations, yet psychological suffering remains a major global concern. Depression and anxiety affect hundreds of millions of people worldwide, while loneliness, burnout, addiction, and loss of meaning have become prominent subjects of public-health and cultural debate.[1] These realities should not be reduced to a single cause. Mental illness is complex, involving biological, psychological, social, economic, relational, and sometimes spiritual factors. Nevertheless, the persistence of distress amid material progress raises a legitimate question: **What dimensions of human flourishing are not captured by technological capability or economic growth?**

The question is especially important because modern societies often possess sophisticated tools for treating symptoms while remaining divided about the larger purposes within which human beings should live. Medicine can treat many forms of illness; psychology can identify patterns of cognition, emotion, and behavior; social policy can reduce material insecurity. These are indispensable achievements. Yet none of them, by itself, settles questions such as why suffering should be endured, what makes a life meaningful, what obligations accompany freedom, or whether human worth depends on productivity and success.

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[1] World Health Organization, Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates (WHO, 2023).

This distinction points toward a deeper question at the center of this book: **What can human beings do, and what should they do with what they can do?** Modern progress has expanded human capability in extraordinary ways. But capability alone does not establish purpose. Knowing what is possible does not necessarily tell us what is worthwhile, responsible, or ultimately meaningful. The challenge, then, is not to dismiss progress, but to ask what should orient it toward a flourishing human life.

The decline of traditional religious and communal structures in parts of the modern world has coincided with the rise of more individualized approaches to identity and meaning. It would be too simple to claim that secularization causes depression or that religious societies are free from psychological suffering. They are not. Social inequality, trauma, discrimination, family instability, chronic illness, economic insecurity, and many other conditions shape mental health.[2] Nor does meaningful psychological well-being necessarily depend on religious belief; people can develop purpose, connection, and moral commitments through different philosophical and social frameworks. The more defensible observation is that when inherited frameworks of meaning weaken, individuals may bear a greater burden of constructing purpose for themselves.

Consumer culture offers one possible answer: fulfillment through acquisition, achievement, status, novelty, and experience. Yet adaptation limits the durability of many material gains. The literature associated with the "hedonic treadmill" suggests that people often adapt to improved circumstances and return toward previous levels of affective experience, although income remains highly important for security and well-being, especially where basic needs are unmet.[3] The point is therefore not that material conditions do not matter. They matter profoundly. Rather, they do not exhaust what a human being needs to flourish.

Islam approaches this problem through a different anthropology. The human being is embodied but not reducible to consumption, productivity, or

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[2] R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger (Bloomsbury, 2009).

[3] R. A. Easterlin, "Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?" in Nations and Households in Economic Growth, ed. P. A. David and M. W. Reder (Academic Press, 1974)

biological survival. The Qur'anic vision includes body, intellect, moral agency, relationships, and a spiritual orientation toward the Creator. In this view, psychological well-being cannot be understood only as the absence of unpleasant emotion. A flourishing life also requires purpose, moral coherence, meaningful relationships, disciplined desire, hope, and an orientation beyond the self. This does not mean that spirituality explains every form of psychological suffering or that faith replaces medicine, psychology, or social support. Rather, it identifies a dimension of human flourishing that those disciplines may address only indirectly: **the question of what a human life is for**. That question will guide the discussion that follows, as we examine spiritual orientation not as an escape from the realities of modern life, but as one dimension of a broader understanding of human flourishing.

2. Islam's Restorative Thesis: From Achievement to Orientation

The core argument here is that Islamic spirituality can provide a powerful framework of meaning, discipline, hope, and belonging that contributes to human well-being. Its central claim is not that faith makes believers immune to mental illness, nor that worship should replace professional treatment. Rather, Islam reorients the human person: from self-sufficiency toward dependence on Allah, from endless acquisition toward gratitude, from anxiety over total control toward responsible effort and *tawakkul (*trust and reliance upon Allah), and from suffering as mere absurdity toward a moral and eschatological horizon.

However, I would be cautious to regard Islam as the only framework through which human beings can experience meaning or psychological well-being. People without religious belief can develop purpose, moral commitments, supportive relationships, and practices that contribute to their well-being. The distinctiveness of the Islamic framework lies in the source and structure it gives to these concerns. Meaning is not ultimately constructed by the individual alone; it is grounded in a relationship with

Allah and expressed through how a person understands the self, responsibility, suffering, desire, and the life to come.

The Qur'an states: "Surely in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (Qur'an 13:28). The verse makes a theological claim about the *qalb*—the heart—as a center of moral and spiritual perception. In Islamic discourse, the heart is not simply the anatomical organ. It is associated with understanding, intention, receptivity, sincerity, hardness, disease, purification, and tranquility. To speak of healing the heart is therefore to speak about the orientation of the person as a whole.

The Qur'anic concept of *sakinah* conveys tranquility, settledness, and reassurance granted by Allah. It does not mean that a believer never experiences grief, fear, or psychological disturbance. The Qur'an itself portrays prophets and righteous people experiencing sorrow, danger, separation, uncertainty, and intense emotional pain. Spiritual tranquility is better understood as an anchoring orientation within those experiences: suffering can remain painful without becoming metaphysically meaningless.

This distinction is important because psychological well-being and spiritual orientation are related without being identical. A person may experience faith and still struggle with depression, anxiety, trauma, or other forms of psychological distress. Likewise, a person may experience psychological well-being without religious belief. Islamic spirituality therefore should not be presented as a universal substitute for clinical care or as a simple explanation for mental health outcomes. Its contribution is different: it offers a framework through which a believer can interpret the experiences of life and orient the self toward Allah.

Research on meditation, focused attention, and contemplative practices has identified associations with changes in attention, stress regulation, and patterns of brain activity.[4] Such findings can illuminate possible mechanisms relevant to repetitive, attentive spiritual practice, but they should not be presented as direct scientific proof of Qur'anic *dhikr*

[4] B. R. Cahn and J. Polich, "Meditation States and Traits: EEG, ERP, and Neuroimaging Studies," Psychological Bulletin 132, no. 2 (2006): 180–211.

(remembrance of Allah) unless *dhikr* itself has been specifically studied. Revelation and neuroscience answer different kinds of questions. For the believer, the value of *dhikr* rests first on revelation; empirical research may explore some of its psychological correlates without exhausting its religious meaning.

Islam is not valuable because contemporary psychology happens to resemble some of its practices, nor does a laboratory finding authenticate revelation. The more intellectually responsible approach is to place Islamic teachings and modern research in conversation while respecting their different methods, assumptions, and limits.

3. Fitrah, Purpose, and the Human Need for Meaning

The Islamic account of well-being begins before particular practices such as prayer or fasting. It begins with a conception of what a human being is. The Qur'an describes humanity as created by Allah, morally accountable, endowed with capacities for knowledge and choice, vulnerable to forgetfulness and desire, and called to worship: "I did not create *jinn* and humans except to worship Me" (Qur'an 51:56). Worship in this sense is broader than ritual. It establishes the ultimate direction within which work, family, learning, service, wealth, rest, and social responsibility can acquire meaning.

The concept of *fitrah*, often understood as the primordial disposition with which human beings are created, adds another dimension. Islamic theology has interpreted *fitrah* in several ways, but it is commonly connected to an innate receptivity to truth and to recognition of the Creator. The spiritual problem is therefore not merely insufficient stimulation or achievement; it can also be misorientation. A person may be externally successful while internally unsure what success is for.

Modern psychological literature on meaning does not establish the theological claims of Islam, but it does reinforce the importance of purpose. Viktor Frankl famously emphasized the human search for meaning,

especially under conditions of suffering.[5] Contemporary research likewise distinguishes pleasure from forms of well-being associated with purpose, relationships, competence, and values. These findings help clarify the importance of meaning as a dimension of human well-being, but they do not determine its ultimate source. Islam adds an explicitly transcendent horizon: the meaning of life is not invented entirely by the isolated self but received, interpreted, and lived in relationship with Allah.

This distinction has practical consequences. If worth is grounded only in achievement, failure threatens identity. If worth is grounded only in social approval, rejection becomes existential. If worth is grounded only in youth, beauty, wealth, or productivity, aging and illness can feel like erasure. Islamic faith does not make these losses emotionally easy, but it relocates ultimate worth beyond them. Human dignity is not granted by a market, employer, algorithm, audience, or social class.

The new title of this book becomes especially relevant here. Progress is not enough when it expands what human beings can possess without clarifying what they should love; when it multiplies choices without cultivating the character needed to choose well; or when it extends life without addressing what life is for. The question is therefore not simply what human beings can accomplish, but what they should pursue and what kind of human life those accomplishments should serve. Spiritual orientation does not compete with progress. It asks progress to serve a coherent conception of the human good. In this sense, *fitrah* and purpose provide a foundation for what follows in this narrative. If the human person has an orientation toward Allah and a life ordered by meaning, then spiritual practices are not isolated techniques for managing distress. They become ways of shaping desire, attention, conduct, and response to the circumstances of life.

[5] V. Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning (Beacon Press, 1959).

4. Material Achievement, Gratitude, and Contentment

Modern economic life depends in part on aspiration: people work, innovate, save, invest, and seek better conditions. Islam does not condemn prosperity as such. Wealth can support families, education, charity, social institutions, and human dignity. The Qur'anic critique is directed not simply at possession but at arrogance, ingratitude, exploitation, waste, and the illusion that accumulation can make the human being self-sufficient.

Research on income and well-being is more nuanced than the popular statement that "money cannot buy happiness." Income can strongly affect life evaluation and can protect against deprivation and insecurity. Earlier influential work distinguished evaluation of life from day-to-day emotional well-being, while later research has continued to refine the relationship.[6] The Islamic contribution is not an economic formula about an income threshold. It is a moral psychology of possession: wealth is a blessing and a trust, not a final measure of human worth.

Shukr, or gratitude, is central to that moral psychology. The Qur'an repeatedly links gratitude to recognition of the Giver and warns against taking blessings for granted. Gratitude therefore involves perception, speech, and action: recognizing a blessing, praising Allah for it, and using it responsibly. Psychological studies have found that structured gratitude practices can improve aspects of subjective well-being for many participants.[7] Broader work on gratitude associates it with positive emotion and adaptive coping, although effects vary across individuals and contexts.[8]

The resonance is important, but Islamic *shukr* is not reducible to a positive-psychology exercise. A gratitude journal may train attention toward what is good; *shukr* additionally asks what responsibility follows from

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[6] D. Kahneman and A. Deaton, "High Income Improves Evaluation of Life but Not Emotional Well-Being," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 107, no. 38 (2010): 16489–93.

[7] R. A. Emmons and M. E. McCullough, "Counting Blessings Versus Burdens," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 84, no. 2 (2003): 377–89.

[8] R. A. Emmons, Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier (Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

receiving the good. Health creates obligations toward the body. Wealth creates obligations toward dependents and the poor. Knowledge creates obligations of honesty and service. Time creates accountability for how it is spent. Blessings are not merely things to enjoy. They are also forms of *amānah* (trust or entrusted responsibility), carrying responsibilities that extend beyond the self.

Contentment, or *qanā'ah*, similarly differs from resignation. It does not forbid ambition or improvement. It limits the transformation of desire into permanent dissatisfaction. A person can seek lawful improvement while refusing to make happiness conditional upon the next salary, possession, title, or comparison. In an economy structured to continuously generate new wants, contentment becomes not passivity but freedom from being governed by endless appetite.

The question is not whether people should pursue prosperity, but what prosperity is for and whether acquiring more strengthens or distorts the purposes that give a life meaning. *Shukr* disciplines how blessings are received and used, while *qanā'ah* disciplines how desire responds to what has not yet been received. Together, they offer a way to pursue improvement without making accumulation the measure of a flourishing life.

5. Prayer (Ṣalāh) as Sacred Rhythm and Psychological Structure

Among the most distinctive features of Muslim daily life is *ṣalāh (prayer)*. Five times each day, worship interrupts ordinary activity. The interruption is itself significant. Work, entertainment, travel, meetings, and digital communication are temporarily subordinated to a higher claim. The day is not organized only around productivity; it is repeatedly reorganized around remembrance.

Consider a person whose workday is divided among meetings, messages, notifications, and competing demands. Even when the work is meaningful, attention can become fragmented by the constant expectation to respond. The five daily prayers introduce recurring points at which those

demands are temporarily set aside. Their significance is therefore not simply that they occupy time, but that they establish a different rhythm within it.

From a behavioral perspective, the prayer times can function as recurring anchor points. Wudu marks a transition. Standing, recitation, bowing, prostration, sitting, and focused intention engage body and attention together. Popular accounts sometimes claim that *ṣalāh* directly activates particular neurological systems or produces specific clinical effects. Such claims require careful evidence. Research on religious practice more broadly does associate religious involvement with various health and coping outcomes, but the pathways include social support, behavior, meaning, identity, and selection effects as well as spiritual practice itself.[9][10]

The psychological value of *ṣalāh* can therefore be described without overstating neuroscience. It creates rhythm in a fragmented day. It requires temporary disengagement from competing stimuli. It places the body in postures of humility. It repeats Qur'anic language that reorients attention toward mercy, accountability, gratitude, dependence, and guidance. It also establishes a practice that does not wait for motivation: prayer is performed because it is due.

This last point is particularly important in a culture that often treats authenticity as acting only when one feels internally ready. Islamic worship trains a different relationship between feeling and action. A believer may pray while joyful, exhausted, distracted, grieving, or anxious. The practice teaches that meaningful action need not be postponed until emotion cooperates. In psychological terms, structured action can sometimes precede changes in feeling; in religious terms, worship is an act of fidelity.

Prostration (*sujūd*) also carries a powerful symbolic reversal. Human beings spend much of modern life seeking elevation: higher rank, higher income, greater visibility, more influence. In prayer, nearness to Allah is expressed through lowering oneself. The body teaches what the ego resists:

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[9] A. Newberg and M. R. Waldman, How God Changes Your Brain (Ballantine Books, 2009).

[10] H. G. Koenig, D. E. King, and V. B. Carson, Handbook of Religion and Health, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2012).

greatness belongs ultimately to Allah, and human dignity does not require self-deification.

Congregational prayer adds a social dimension. Regular participation can create repeated contact, recognition, friendship, and mutual aid. Public-health literature has highlighted the importance of social connection and the risks associated with isolation.[11] The mosque cannot guarantee belonging. Communities can themselves exclude or fail. But the architecture of repeated gathering creates opportunities for relationships that purely individualized spirituality does not.

In this way, *ṣalāh* extends the argument of the previous section from the management of desire to the ordering of daily life. *Shukr* and *qanā'ah* shape how a person receives and desires material blessings; *ṣalāh* establishes recurring moments in which attention, action, and time are placed within a higher order. Its significance is therefore not only psychological. It is a practical expression of spiritual orientation within the ordinary structure of modern life.

6. Fasting (Ṣawm): Desire, Discipline, and Freedom

Ramadan fasting is often described in terms of self-control, but its spiritual logic is richer. The Qur'an connects fasting to *taqwā*, a state of God-consciousness that shapes moral attention and conduct. The believer voluntarily abstains from ordinarily lawful things, food, drink, and marital intimacy during the fasting hours, in order to strengthen obedience to moral limits.

Research on intermittent fasting has explored metabolic and neurological mechanisms, including pathways relevant to metabolic health and cellular stress responses.[12] It is important, however, not to transfer every finding from intermittent-fasting protocols directly to Ramadan. Ramadan

[11] V. H. Murthy, Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes-Lonely World (Harper Wave, 2020).

[12] M. Mattson et al., "Intermittent Fasting and Human Metabolic Health," Annual Review of Nutrition 35 (2015): 371–94.

fasting has different schedules, cultural contexts, sleep patterns, meals, and spiritual practices. Claims about BDNF, depression, or lasting executive-function changes should therefore be made cautiously unless supported by Ramadan-specific evidence.

What can be said directly from the religious practice is that fasting trains the relationship between desire and action. Hunger is felt but not immediately obeyed. Anger may arise but should not be indulged. A harmful word may come to mind but should not be spoken. This does not portray desire as evil; it teaches that desire is not sovereign.

Such discipline has special relevance in a digital consumer environment built around immediacy. Food arrives with a tap, entertainment begins on demand, purchases can be completed in seconds, and platforms are designed to reduce friction between impulse and action. Fasting deliberately restores friction. It teaches the capacity to experience an urge without automatically converting it into behavior.

The significance extends beyond food. A person may experience an impulse to respond angrily, make an unnecessary purchase, consume another piece of content, or satisfy a desire immediately. Fasting creates a practiced space between wanting and acting. In that space, the believer learns that freedom is not the ability to satisfy every desire, but the ability to govern desire according to a higher commitment.

Ramadan also connects self-restraint to empathy and community. Hunger can increase awareness of vulnerability; iftar creates shared ritual; charity intensifies; nightly worship changes the rhythm of communal life. Yet the ethical goal is not achieved merely by remaining hungry. Prophetic teaching repeatedly links fasting to speech and conduct, reminding the believer that bodily abstinence without moral discipline misses the deeper purpose.

This also shows how *ṣawm* intersects with the broader dimensions of flourishing. Its primary work is spiritual, forming *taqwā* and disciplined desire, but its effects extend into relationships, charity, consumption, and conduct. Fasting therefore turns an inward act of restraint into a practice with social and ethical consequences.

The well-known hadith in Sahih Muslim describes the believer as responding to ease with gratitude and hardship with patience. This is not an instruction to call pain pleasant. It is a framework for responding to changing circumstances without allowing either state to determine one's entire orientation. Ease becomes an occasion for *shukr*; hardship becomes an arena for *ṣabr (patience)*. In this sense, fasting provides a concrete setting in which restraint, gratitude, patience, and moral attention can be practiced together.

If ṣalāh gives the day a sacred rhythm, ṣawm gives desire a discipline. One interrupts the flow of activity; the other interrupts the automatic movement from impulse to action. Together, they show how Islamic worship does more than provide moments of devotion. It trains the person to live deliberately within the conditions of ordinary life.

7. Qadar, Tawakkul, Ṣabr, and the Limits of Control

Anxiety often concerns uncertainty: what will happen, whether plans will succeed, whether loss can be prevented, whether one has done enough. Islamic theology does not remove uncertainty from worldly life. Instead, the doctrines of *qadar* (Divine decree) and *tawakkul* place uncertainty within a relationship between human responsibility and divine sovereignty.

Qadar should not be reduced to fatalism. Islamic moral responsibility presupposes intention, choice, effort, and accountability. *Tawakkul* likewise does not mean abandoning causes. The believer seeks treatment when ill, works for provision, plans carefully, asks advice, and takes precautions; reliance on Allah concerns the ultimate dependence of outcomes on what lies beyond human control.

Having this clarity becomes pivotal because uncertainty can create the illusion that greater effort should produce greater control. A person may plan carefully, work diligently, seek advice, and still encounter an outcome that could not have been prevented. Islamic thought does not remove the responsibility to act; it places a limit on what that responsibility can reasonably include. The believer is accountable for intention and effort, while outcomes ultimately remain beyond complete human control.

This structure has a conceptual resonance with psychological approaches that distinguish controllable action from futile struggle against what cannot be changed. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, for example, teaches acceptance of difficult internal experiences while encouraging action aligned with chosen values.[13] *Qadar* and ACT are not equivalent: one is a theological doctrine embedded in revelation and the other a clinical model. The comparison is useful only at the level of a shared insight: human flourishing requires acting where action is possible without demanding total control over reality.

Ṣabr is similarly richer than passive patience. It includes perseverance in obedience, restraint from wrongdoing, and steadfastness during adversity. A person practicing *ṣabr* may grieve, seek justice, ask for help, change circumstances, and still remain patient. The Qur'anic and Prophetic traditions do not require emotional numbness.

This also clarifies the difference between *tawakkul* and passivity. If a person refuses available treatment, neglects reasonable precautions, or avoids necessary action while claiming to rely on Allah, the concept has been misunderstood. Reliance does not cancel agency. It changes the believer's relationship with uncertainty by separating the duty to act from the demand to guarantee the result.

Tawakkul can also challenge perfectionism. Modern achievement cultures often encourage the belief that every outcome is a verdict on the self: if one plans correctly, works hard enough, optimizes enough, and avoids every mistake, success should follow. When reality refuses that bargain, failure can become shame. *Tawakkul* separates responsibility for effort from absolute ownership of outcomes.

Research in the psychology of religion has shown that religious coping can be helpful or harmful depending on its form. Positive religious coping, such as seeking spiritual support, benevolent meaning, and connection, can be associated with better adjustment, while negative religious coping, such as interpreting hardship solely as divine abandonment or punishment, can

[13] S. C. Hayes et al., Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, 2nd ed. (Guilford Press, 2012).

intensify distress.[14] This nuance is crucial. Islamic teachings should not be used to shame a suffering person for insufficient faith.

The practical lesson is therefore neither "control everything" nor "control nothing." It is to recognize what responsible action requires, act within those limits, and accept that outcomes cannot be completely possessed or guaranteed. In this sense, *qadar*, *tawakkul*, and *ṣabr* address a problem that achievement and discipline alone cannot solve: how to live faithfully when effort does not give us certainty.

8. Suffering, Grief, and Meaning Without Denial

Any serious account of spiritual well-being must confront suffering. A theology that speaks convincingly only when life is comfortable is not enough. Illness, bereavement, infertility, unemployment, displacement, betrayal, disability, war, and injustice can alter a life permanently. Islam does not deny this reality. The Qur'an speaks openly of fear, hunger, loss, tears, separation, and death.

The Islamic response is not the claim that every tragedy will become understandable in this life. Rather, suffering is located within a universe in which Allah knows what human beings do not know, injustice is not the final word, moral action remains meaningful, and death is not the end of the human story. This eschatological horizon changes the structure of meaning even when it does not remove pain.

Moreover, one should be very careful of imposing a meaning on suffering after the fact. A person may not understand why a particular loss occurred, and Islamic faith does not require that every painful event be explained as though its wisdom were accessible. The spiritual question is instead how a person lives within what cannot be fully understood: whether grief can be acknowledged without becoming the whole definition of life, whether moral action remains possible, and whether hope can survive uncertainty.

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[14] K. I. Pargament, Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy (Guilford Press, 2007).

Viktor Frankl's work remains influential because it articulated the psychological importance of meaning under conditions that cannot simply be changed. Islamic theology goes beyond logotherapy by specifying a transcendent source of meaning, but the comparison highlights an important point: despair is not determined only by the intensity of pain; it can also be shaped by whether pain is experienced as utterly purposeless. This is a point of conceptual comparison, not evidence that Frankl's psychological framework validates Islamic theology.

At the same time, religious language can be misused. Telling a grieving person simply to "have *ṣabr*" may become a way of silencing grief. Telling someone with depression to "pray more" may confuse a clinical condition with a moral failure. The Prophet ﷺ grieved, wept, sought support, and acknowledged human vulnerability. Patience and grief can coexist. Trust in Allah and medical treatment can coexist. Spiritual strength and psychological illness can coexist.

This is also where an important tension must remain visible. If suffering can exist within a meaningful religious framework, how can that meaning be communicated without turning suffering itself into something that must be welcomed, justified, or explained? The distinction is between finding a faithful way to respond to suffering and claiming that the suffering was necessary or that its purpose is known. The first concerns moral and spiritual response; the second may exceed what human beings can know.

A balanced approach is therefore essential to the thesis of *When Progress Is Not Enough*. Modern clinical care can be lifesaving, and Muslims should not reject it merely because it is modern. But treatment can also benefit from understanding the patient's moral and spiritual world. The choice need not be between therapy and faith. For many believers, the most humane care will respect both.

The question is no longer only how a person should act when circumstances can be shaped, but how meaning can remain possible when circumstances cannot be fully controlled. That question leads naturally to the Islamic tradition's deeper study of the inner life.

9. Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and the Islamic Study of the Inner Life

Muslim intellectual history contains extensive reflection on emotion, character, cognition, habit, and the relationship between body and soul. Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037) are especially important examples, though they worked within different intellectual projects.

Al-Ghazali's *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences.) devotes sustained attention to the purification of the heart and to moral qualities such as pride, envy, anger, greed, sincerity, patience, gratitude, hope, and fear.[15] His analysis assumes that repeated actions shape character and that moral reform requires self-observation, knowledge, disciplined practice, and divine assistance. Qur'anic terms such as *al-nafs al-ammārah* (the commanding self), *al-nafs al-lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching soul), *al-nafs al-muṭmaʾinnah* (the tranquil soul) describe different moral-spiritual conditions of the self.

It is tempting to call these concepts an early version of modern cognitive-behavioral therapy, but that would be historically imprecise. CBT emerged from a particular twentieth-century clinical tradition and is evaluated through modern empirical methods.[16] A better formulation is that al-Ghazali's account contains conceptual parallels with later psychological ideas about cognition, habit, self-monitoring, and behavioral change. Similarity does not erase the very different theological and historical frameworks. Nor should those parallels be treated as evidence that classical Islamic scholarship had already established modern clinical psychology.

Ibn Sina likewise discussed perception, emotion, imagination, bodily states, and medicine within a comprehensive philosophical and medical

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[15] Al-Ghazali, Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), various editions.

[16] A. T. Beck, Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders (International Universities Press, 1976).

system.[17] His work is important evidence that premodern Muslim scholarship did not sharply isolate psychological experience from bodily health. It would be anachronistic, however, to say that he "anticipated psychoneuroimmunology" in the modern scientific sense. What can responsibly be said is that he recognized interactions between emotional and bodily conditions long before contemporary disciplines formalized their own experimental approaches.

These historical examples matter because they challenge two opposite misconceptions. The first is that concern for mental and emotional life is foreign to Islamic tradition. The second is that classical Muslim scholars had already discovered modern psychology in full. Neither is accurate. The tradition contains rich resources for thinking about the inner life, character, embodiment, and moral formation, while contemporary mental-health science contributes its own methods, evidence, diagnoses, and treatments.

The significance of this history for the present chapter is therefore not that the past can replace contemporary science. It is that the Islamic tradition offers an intellectual vocabulary for questions that remain relevant: how habits shape character, how desire can be governed, how emotional states relate to bodily life, and how the inner person can be cultivated. These resources can enter into conversation with contemporary psychology without being collapsed into it.

Islamic practices have been considered not as isolated techniques, but as forms of orientation and formation. The classical tradition shows that this concern with the inner life is not a recent attempt to make Islam resemble modern psychology. It has its own history and categories. The remaining question is how these resources can be brought into responsible conversation with contemporary mental-health knowledge without confusing theological meaning, historical insight, and empirical evidence.

[17] Ibn Sina (Avicenna), The Canon of Medicine, various editions.

10. Contemporary Mental Health and Spiritually Integrated Care

Contemporary psychology and psychiatry increasingly recognize that religion and spirituality can be clinically relevant for many patients. The large literature summarized in works on religion and health reports associations between religious involvement and a range of outcomes, although effects differ by population, practice, social context, and type of religious coping.[18] Religion can provide meaning, community, behavioral norms, hope, and support; it can also become a source of distress when associated with coercion, stigma, spiritual struggle, or harmful interpretations.

This elaborates the difference between religion as a source of support and religion as it is actually experienced within a particular person's life. A patient may draw strength from faith, experience conflict within a religious community, struggle with guilt, or move between these experiences over time. Spirituality should therefore be explored rather than assumed to be either inherently therapeutic or inherently harmful.

For Muslim patients, culturally and religiously responsive therapy may improve the fit between treatment and worldview. Approaches described as Islamically integrated or religiously adapted cognitive-behavioral therapy have explored ways of incorporating Qur'anic concepts, prayer, *dhikr*, *tawakkul*, and religious values into evidence-based clinical frameworks.[19] The evidence base is still developing, and such approaches should not be presented as universally superior. Their importance lies in demonstrating that competent therapy need not require a patient to bracket out faith.

A therapist working with a Muslim client might, with the client's consent, explore whether Qur'anic language of hope is meaningful, whether prayer provides structure, whether religious guilt is adaptive or excessive,

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[18] H. G. Koenig, D. E. King, and V. B. Carson, Handbook of Religion and Health, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2012).

[19] S. M. Razali et al., "Religious-Sociocultural Psychotherapy in Depressed Outpatients," International Journal of Social Psychiatry 48, no. 4 (2002): 301–9.

whether family and mosque relationships are supportive, and how *tawakkul* can coexist with practical action. The direction should come from clinical competence and the patient's own commitments rather than from imposing religious content. Where psychological recommendations and a patient's religious commitments appear to conflict, the task is not to assume that one side must simply override the other. The therapist should clarify the clinical concern, understand the religious meaning involved, and work with the patient toward an approach that is both clinically responsible and consistent with the patient's values.

The same principle applies within Muslim communities. Imams and community leaders can play important roles in recognition, referral, pastoral support, and reducing stigma, but they should not be expected to replace psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians, or other qualified clinicians when specialized treatment is required. Conversely, clinicians working with religious patients benefit from understanding that spiritual commitments may be central rather than peripheral to identity.

A mature Islamic approach to mental health therefore avoids reducing complex human distress to a single domain. Biological treatment, psychotherapy, social support, spiritual practice, and changes in material conditions can all be relevant depending on the case. The aim is not to create a competition between religious and clinical explanations, but to recognize that different forms of knowledge may address different dimensions of the same human experience.

We have now extended our argument from spiritual formation to practical care. Earlier sections examined how Islamic concepts shape meaning, desire, time, and responses to uncertainty. Here, those commitments enter an institutional setting in which psychological suffering is assessed and treated. The question becomes not whether faith should replace modern care, but how care can take the whole person seriously when spiritual commitments are part of that person's understanding of life.

11. Dhikr, Attention, and the Recovery of Interior Life

Dhikr, remembrance of Allah, is both a specific devotional practice and a broader orientation of consciousness. It can include Qur'anic recitation, prescribed supplications, phrases of glorification and praise, seeking forgiveness, and the inward recollection of Allah throughout ordinary life. Its opposite in the Qur'anic moral vocabulary is not simply ignorance but heedlessness: living as though ultimate reality and accountability were absent.

This makes *dhikr* particularly relevant to an attention economy. Digital environments compete continuously for cognitive access. Notifications, feeds, advertising, entertainment, and work communication can fragment attention into short cycles of reaction. A person may remain connected to other people throughout the day while having very little uninterrupted attention for prayer, reflection, conversation, or sustained thought. *Dhikr* deliberately redirects attention toward what the believer understands to be ultimate rather than merely urgent.

The problem is not technology itself. Digital tools can strengthen communication, access to knowledge, work, education, and community. The developmental question is what happens when systems designed to capture attention begin to shape the conditions under which attention is given. In that environment, *dhikr* offers not a rejection of technology but a discipline of deciding what deserves repeated attention.

Neuroimaging studies of meditation have reported differences in default-mode-network activity among experienced meditators.[20] Such research is relevant to scientific discussions of attention and self-referential thought, but it does not justify the direct statement that Islamic *dhikr* necessarily "quiets the DMN" in the same manner. Different contemplative practices have different cognitive contents, intentions, postures, and theological meanings. Direct research on specific forms of *dhikr* is required before making precise neurological claims.

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[20] J. Brewer et al., "Meditation Experience Is Associated with Differences in Default Mode Network Activity," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 108, no. 50 (2011): 20254–59.

The psychological significance of *dhikr* can nevertheless be described at the level of attention and appraisal. *Subḥān Allāh* (Glory be to Allah) places the imperfection of creation against divine transcendence. *Al-ḥamdulillāh* (Praise be to Allah) directs attention toward gratitude. *Allahu Akbar* relativizes the apparent ultimacy of worldly threats and achievements. *Astaghfirullāh* (I seek Allah's forgiveness) turns failure toward repentance rather than permanent self-condemnation. *Lā ḥawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh* (There is no power or strength except through Allah) reminds the believer of dependence rather than fantasies of total control.

These phrases should not be treated as clinical techniques stripped of worship. Their meaning is theological. Yet theology itself shapes cognition: what a person believes about power, guilt, mercy, death, provision, and the future affects how events are interpreted. *Dhikr* forms those interpretations through repetition, memory, and presence.

This has practical significance in a culture in which attention is increasingly treated as a resource to be captured. The question is not simply how much information a person can process, but what repeated exposure is doing to desire, reflection, and priorities. A person who moves continuously between messages, short videos, news, advertisements, and work notifications may find that silence itself becomes difficult. *Dhikr* introduces a different pattern: attention is repeatedly returned to a chosen object of ultimate significance rather than surrendered entirely to whatever demands it most immediately.

12. Hope, Repentance, and the Refusal of Despair

Rajāʾ (hope) occupies a central place in Islamic spirituality. The Qur'an repeatedly directs sinners, sufferers, and communities away from despair. "Do not despair of the mercy of Allah" (Qur'an 39:53) is among the most powerful formulations of this principle.[21] Hope is not optimism that every worldly outcome will unfold as desired. It is confidence that divine mercy,

[21] Qur'an 39:53.

forgiveness, and meaning remain possible even when circumstances are painful.

This distinction is psychologically important. Unrealistic optimism can collapse when events contradict expectation. Islamic hope can survive disappointment because its final object is not a particular job, relationship, diagnosis, or worldly victory. A believer may desperately want a specific outcome while still believing that Allah's mercy is larger than that outcome.

Hope therefore answers a different problem from the one addressed by *tawakkul* in the previous discussion. *Tawakkul* concerns how a person lives when outcomes cannot be controlled; *rajāʾ* concerns how a person continues to orient toward mercy and possibility when circumstances have already brought disappointment, loss, or failure. The two are related, but they are not interchangeable. One concerns reliance amid uncertainty; the other keeps despair from becoming the final interpretation of the self or the future.

Repentance (*tawbah*) gives hope a moral structure. Human beings fail, sometimes seriously. A worldview without forgiveness can trap a person between denial and permanent shame. Islamic repentance requires recognition, remorse, cessation of wrongdoing, and, where the rights of others are involved, restoration as far as possible. It neither trivializes wrongdoing nor treats the wrongdoer as incapable of return.

This becomes particularly significant in an age of permanent digital memory. Past mistakes can be recorded, searchable, copied, and repeatedly exposed. A person may be judged by an old statement, photograph, post, or action long after circumstances have changed. Islamic theology offers a different understanding of moral identity: a person's past remains morally relevant, but it does not have to become the entirety of that person's identity before Allah. Genuine repentance can mark a new beginning even when worldly consequences remain.

Digital systems can preserve information without preserving context. A past action may remain visible while the remorse, growth, accountability, and changed conduct that followed it remain invisible. *Tawbah* does not erase consequences or require others to forget wrongdoing. It establishes the possibility that moral identity can develop after failure. In this sense,

repentance offers a spiritual response to a technological environment in which the past can remain permanently present.

Research summarized in the psychology of religion suggests that meaning, spiritual support, and positive religious coping can be associated with better adjustment during illness, bereavement, and adversity.[22] The effect is not universal, and nonreligious people are not condemned to nihilism or collapse. The stronger and more defensible claim is that Islamic belief offers Muslims a distinctive reservoir of hope whose content includes divine mercy, accountability, repentance, community, and the afterlife. These religious resources should be understood as part of a broader framework of coping rather than as proof that faith produces the same psychological outcome for every believer.

If repentance protects against permanent shame, it must not become a way of avoiding responsibility. If hope protects against despair, it must not become permission to ignore harm. Islamic hope is therefore connected to accountability. The possibility of return does not make wrongdoing insignificant; it makes moral change possible without declaring the person permanently defined by the wrongdoing.

This is also why suicide and severe depression require especially careful language. A person experiencing suicidal thoughts needs compassion, safety, and qualified help, not theological accusation. Hope can be spiritually meaningful, but severe psychological distress may impair a person's ability to experience or sustain that hope. Islamic communities honor the sanctity of life most effectively when spiritual care and competent mental-health intervention reinforce rather than obstruct one another.

The movement from suffering to hope completes an important part of the argument. Earlier sections considered how Islamic practices shape attention, desire, uncertainty, and responses to adversity. *Rajāʾ* and *tawbah* add another dimension: they shape how a person understands the future and the possibility of moral renewal. Spiritual orientation therefore does not require a life without failure, loss, or psychological pain. It provides a

[22] Koenig, King, and Carson, Handbook of Religion and Health.

framework in which those realities need not become the final definition of either the person or the future.

13. Practical Integration: A Spiritual Ecology of Well-being

Taken together, Islamic practices form what may be called a spiritual ecology rather than a collection of isolated techniques. *Ṣalāh* structures time. *Dhikr* trains remembrance. Fasting disciplines desire. *Zakāt* (purification of wealth) and charity turn concern outward. Qur'anic recitation shapes moral imagination. *Tawbah* makes renewal possible. *Ṣabr* supports perseverance. *Shukr* trains recognition of blessing. *Tawakkul* limits the illusion of control. Family and community provide belonging. None of these functions in exactly the same way, and none should be reduced to a single psychological mechanism.

This integrated character helps explain why Islam's contribution to well-being cannot be captured by asking whether one practice "works" like a medication. Religion concerns the meaning of the person's entire life: what is loved, feared, hoped for, pursued, restrained, remembered, and ultimately worshipped. Its psychological effects, where they occur, are embedded in that larger moral world.

For contemporary Muslims, practical integration may include protecting the prayer times from unnecessary digital intrusion; maintaining regular Qur'anic recitation and *dhikr*; cultivating gratitude without denying hardship; using fasting to examine habits of consumption; seeking supportive community; maintaining sleep, exercise, and physical health; consulting clinicians when symptoms require care; and learning enough about Islamic theology to distinguish *tawakkul* from passivity and *ṣabr* from silent suffering.

These practices also raise a broader question about responsibility. A person can make healthier choices while still living within environments that continually undermine attention, rest, relationships, or security. Spiritual discipline therefore cannot be understood as a demand that

individuals solve every problem through greater self-control. The conditions surrounding a person matter as well.

For clinicians and educators, the implication is not that Islamic practices should be prescribed to everyone. It is that a Muslim patient's religious commitments can be clinically and educationally relevant. Respectful inquiry can reveal resources, conflicts, fears, and sources of support that would otherwise remain invisible. It can also prevent an important mistake: assuming that a religious practice has the same meaning for every person simply because the practice is shared.

For technologists and institutions, the chapter raises a broader question. If human attention, emotion, and identity are vulnerable to design, then mental well-being is not only an individual responsibility. Platforms, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and economic systems create environments that can support or undermine human flourishing. The WHO's work on social determinants of health underscores the importance of social and material conditions alongside individual behavior.[23]

This means that the question of responsible design cannot be separated entirely from the question of what human beings are for. A system can be efficient, persuasive, profitable, or technically sophisticated while still producing environments that make reflection, rest, community, or moral agency more difficult. The relevant question is therefore not only what a system can make people do, but what kinds of human behavior and relationships it encourages.

Likewise, international well-being research considers factors beyond income alone, including social support, trust, freedom, generosity, and perceptions of corruption.[24] Such findings do not prove an Islamic worldview. They do reinforce the book's central contention that human flourishing is multidimensional. Spiritual orientation is one dimension, but it intersects with social belonging, economic conditions, and ethical stewardship. A person's inner life cannot be separated entirely from the

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[23] WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health, Closing the Gap in a Generation (WHO, 2008).

[24] J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, and J. D. Sachs, eds., World Happiness Report 2023 (Sustainable Development Solutions Network).

relationships, institutions, and material circumstances in which that life unfolds.

Practical interpretation, therefore, is not the addition of religious practices to an otherwise unchanged model of modern life. It is an attempt to bring different dimensions of human flourishing into conversation: spiritual commitments can shape how people use resources, relate to others, respond to institutions, and evaluate the technologies they create and adopt. In that sense, spiritual orientation gives direction, while social, economic, and ethical conditions help determine whether that orientation can be lived out.

The practical question is larger than whether a person is praying, meditating, working, exercising, or seeking treatment. It is whether the surrounding patterns of life make room for meaning, responsibility, connection, and disciplined attention. Islamic spirituality contributes a framework for answering those questions, but it does so within a human ecology that includes families, communities, economies, institutions, and technologies.

14. Broader Implications: When Progress Is Not Enough

The spiritual crisis explored thus far is therefore not a rejection of modernity. The modern world has produced extraordinary gains in medicine, education, communication, safety, and knowledge. The question is whether these gains can remain humane without an account of what human beings are for.

Artificial intelligence makes the question more urgent. As machines become capable of performing more cognitive and creative tasks, societies may increasingly ask what remains distinctive about human value. If dignity rests on economic productivity alone, automation can appear to reduce the worth of those whose labor is displaced. If dignity is intrinsic and morally grounded, technological efficiency does not determine human value. Ethical critiques of algorithmic systems have already shown how apparently

technical decisions can reproduce social inequalities and obscure responsibility.[25]

Islam's answer begins with servanthood to Allah rather than usefulness to a market. This is a radical reordering of value. A child, an elderly person, a person with disability, an unemployed worker, and a celebrated scientist do not possess different degrees of fundamental human worth because their economic outputs differ. Their responsibilities and circumstances differ, but their humanity is not priced by productivity.

The same reordering affects success. The modern professional may ask: How far did I advance? How much did I earn? How visible did I become? The Qur'anic framework adds different questions: Was the means lawful? Was anyone harmed? Did success increase gratitude or arrogance? Was wealth shared? Was knowledge used responsibly? Did achievement strengthen or weaken the person's relationship with Allah and with other people?

These questions are not obstacles to innovation. They are conditions for directing innovation. Technology expands what human beings can do, but greater capability also creates greater responsibility. In Islamic terms, technological power can be understood as a form of *amānah*: something entrusted to human beings and therefore subject to moral accountability. The relevant question is not only what a system can accomplish, but what its creators, institutions, and users are responsible for doing with that capability.

Artificial intelligence can increase productivity, automate decisions, generate content, analyze information, and extend human capability. None of those capabilities, by themselves, determines whether a particular use is just, beneficial, or worthy of human beings. The ethical question begins where technical possibility ends.

That responsibility also extends beyond individual users. Algorithmic systems can shape access, opportunity, attention, employment, and the distribution of risk. Questions of fairness and accountability therefore cannot be separated entirely from the social and economic conditions in

[25] C. O'Neil, Weapons of Math Destruction (Crown, 2016).

which technology operates. Ethical stewardship connects technological decisions to the broader dimensions of flourishing already visible in this chapter: spiritual orientation gives direction, social relationships give human life context, economic justice concerns how benefits and burdens are distributed, and ethical stewardship concerns how power is exercised.

Seen in this way, our argument is not that spirituality solves the problems created by progress. It is that progress requires an account of the human good if its capabilities are to be directed responsibly. Spiritual orientation is one part of that account, and its significance becomes clearer when it is connected to the social, economic, and ethical dimensions of human flourishing.

When progress is not enough, the answer is not stagnation. It is progress with purpose: capability governed by ethics, prosperity accompanied by justice, connectivity deepened into relationship, and knowledge ordered toward wisdom.

Conclusion: The Spiritual Anchor in a World of Acceleration

Islam does not promise a life without grief, anxiety, illness, uncertainty, or loss. Prophets themselves experienced fear, sorrow, rejection, bereavement, and hardship. Nor should mental illness be interpreted automatically as evidence of spiritual failure. Such an interpretation is theologically careless and clinically harmful.

What Islam offers is an integrated framework within which the human person can seek meaning and well-being: a Creator to whom one belongs, a purpose that exceeds consumption, practices that structure attention and time, moral disciplines that shape desire, a language for patience and gratitude, a theology of hope and repentance, a community of obligation, and an ultimate horizon in which justice and mercy are not confined to the limits of this life.

Modern psychology and neuroscience can illuminate aspects of attention, coping, gratitude, habit, social connection, and religious

involvement. They should be used carefully. General meditation research is not automatically evidence about *dhikr*; intermittent-fasting research is not automatically evidence about Ramadan; correlations between religion and health do not prove that faith prevents mental illness.

The deeper claim of our argument is theological and philosophical. Human beings need more than stimulation, consumption, achievement, and control. They need an answer to the question of what their lives are oriented toward. For Islam, that orientation is remembrance and worship of Allah, expressed through responsibility toward the self, other people, and creation.

This is the spiritual anchor. It does not stop the storm, but it can give the person a place from which to face it. It does not make every suffering intelligible, but it refuses to declare suffering meaningless. It does not determine every practical response to a problem, but it provides a framework within which those responses can be judged.

Progress increases capability. Capability does not determine purpose. Purpose requires moral and spiritual orientation. Yet spiritual orientation does not stand alone. The human life it seeks to guide is lived through relationships, material conditions, institutions, and systems of power. Spiritual flourishing therefore belongs within a broader conception of human flourishing rather than apart from it.

In a disrupted world, that distinction matters. Progress can extend life; it cannot by itself tell us what makes life worth living. Technology can capture attention; it cannot decide what deserves attention. Markets can assign prices; they cannot determine ultimate value. Data can describe behavior; they cannot settle the purpose of the human heart. The harder question is therefore not only what humanity is capable of creating, but what kind of human life those capabilities should serve.

The Qur'anic invitation therefore remains as relevant as ever: "Surely in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (13:28). For the believer, this is not a laboratory hypothesis but a statement about the deepest orientation of human existence. Contemporary evidence may illuminate some of the pathways through which spiritual practices support well-being, but the theological claim reaches further: the heart finds its proper center when it remembers the One from whom life itself comes.

When progress is not enough, the recovery of that center may be one of the most important forms of progress still available to us.

End-of-Chapter Reflection

- **Key Idea:** Spiritual orientation gives human capability a direction. Progress can expand what people can do, but it does not by itself determine what they should pursue or what makes a human life worth living.
- **What the Evidence Shows:** Research can illuminate dimensions of attention, gratitude, coping, social connection, and religious involvement, but evidence must be interpreted according to the practice and population actually studied. Empirical findings do not establish theological claims.
- **Islamic Framework:** *Fitrah*, worship, *ṣalāh*, *dhikr*, *ṣawm*, *ṣabr*, *shukr*, *tawakkul*, *tawbah*, and human dignity provide different forms of spiritual and moral orientation. Together, they shape how a believer understands purpose, desire, uncertainty, suffering, gratitude, responsibility, and hope.
- **The Hard Question:** If human capability continues to expand, what should determine the purposes for which that capability is used?

Reflection Questions

1. **What currently gives your life a sense of purpose beyond achievement or consumption?**

2. **Where does technology strengthen your relationships, attention, or responsibilities, and where does it compete with them?**

3. **Which areas of your life are within your control, and which require *tawakkul*?**

4. **Does your understanding of success include responsibility toward other people, or primarily personal achievement?**

5. **How might your spiritual commitments shape the way you use the capabilities available to you?**

One Practical Step: Choose one recurring part of your day, such as the beginning of work, a prayer time, or the period before sleep, and protect it from unnecessary digital interruption. Use that space for *dhikr*, reflection, Qur'anic recitation, or quiet consideration of what deserves your attention.