

Intention

Excerpts from *The Difficult Journey* by Ahmad Thomson

We entered the Haram through the entrance known as Al-Bab As-Salaam, which in Arabic means ‘the gate of peace’, and into the midst of the huge crowds of people that filled the mosque. It was an extraordinary and awe-inspiring sight. Never had I seen so many people gathered together in one place, and they were all there for the same reason, for Allah. Wherever you looked, there were people dressed in white. Some were standing, or bowing, or prostrating or sitting, as they did voluntary prayers; some were sitting quietly, doing dhikr or reciting the Qur’an; but the vast majority were moving in a huge anti-clockwise circle. And at the very centre of all this movement, towering above everyone, at the still point of the turning world, stood the Ka’aba in all its magnificence and glory.

“Subhana’llah!” I breathed, as my gaze fell on the Ka’aba for the very first time in my life. It seemed to hang in the air, like a very clear mirage, stately and serene, still and immense, draped in a black finely embroidered covering that had golden calligraphy running round it near its top edge, with its bottom edge furled and tied up, so that it was out of the reach of even the tallest man that might try to reach up and touch it. Around this point moved the vast swirl of thousands upon thousands of pilgrims, all immersed in the remembrance of Allah, all forming a human whirlpool that turned and turned without a moment’s pause. It was amazing, and for a few moments we gazed at this ever-changing kaleidoscope of people, not just because the Prophet Muhammad once said that to look at the Ka’aba is to worship Allah, but simply because it was such a beautifully majestic sight to behold.

Then, walking carefully across the huge carpeted area of the mosque that was sheltered by an apparently never-ending series of domed ceilings which were supported by arched columns of fine marble and adorned with large hanging chandeliers, we edged towards the main current of the human whirlpool that swept slowly and inexorably across the open unroofed area that stretches out beneath the open sky, between the covered part of the mosque and the Ka’aba itself. As we moved out into the open, I could see that the covered area of the mosque was sometimes two and even three storeys high, and that there were people circumnambulating the Ka’aba even on those levels and at that distance. We all stepped out into the main current, and soon became separated by the constant flow of people.



The people who were nearest to me were constantly changing. At one moment I would be aware of a frail-looking man who sailed through the crowd as if he were surrounded by an invisible body-guard, space all around him, touching no-one, his eyes down and his lips moving incessantly in dhikr, nothing distracting him from the remembrance of Allah. A moment later, there would be a group of women from Africa, all in high spirits and smiling, holding on to each other and virtually dancing round the Ka’aba. I would look up again, to notice a group of very serious-looking middle-aged people who were all trying to defy the natural flow around them by sticking together while they read out prayer after prayer from the thick books in which their heads were buried. A few moments later, and there would be another large group also trying to stick together, but this time being led round by a mutawwif who was reciting all the duas for them in a loud voice so that they could all try and hear what he was saying. I would steer my course to either one side of them or the other, and soon I would be in different company again. There were so many different people, both men and women, of every age, and so many different groupings of people, from so many different countries and cultures and walks of life, all there for Allah, and all remembering and worshipping and calling upon Allah in the way that was easiest and most natural for them. It was beautiful to behold such diversity, and rather than becoming a distraction, it only served to increase one’s awe of the One who is the source of all created forms.

And as I swam round the Ka’aba, going with the flow, with one tawaf following the next so fluently that I was glad that I had been keeping a careful count of each tawaf with my fingers, one truth became clear to me, a truth that was to become even clearer during the next five days: Even in this vast gathering of Muslims – whose fundamental understanding of the nature of existence and

whose way of life were basically the same – let alone in the whole wide world – where there are so many different people with very varied beliefs and lifestyles – each one of us is completely alone, in the presence of Allah. People may clutch at each other, or at books, or at the Black Stone, or at some of all the rites and rituals that there are in life, or at the beliefs or ideas that make them do so, but in Reality there is nothing to hold on to except Allah. You can only really make a lasting pact with Allah, and not with any thing or any one else.

This realisation was not always easy to accept, for it left me feeling about as helpless and as substantial as a plankton in the middle of the ocean. And the existence of all the other plankton in the sea did nothing to diminish the feeling of complete insignificance that this realisation caused. Like a baby clutching for its mother's bosom, I wanted to latch on to something more tangible, but in this shifting ever-changing sea of people, I simply could not. One of the meanings of the Arabic word 'Al-Hajj' is 'The Difficult Journey', and this difficulty is experienced not only outwardly but also inwardly.

As soon as I just let go, however, and relaxed into the present moment, then it was easy, and, like a plankton, I let the current of the ocean carry me and support me. There was always the next step to take, and in this crowd, even taking the next step required awareness and attention. If you went too fast, you were likely to tread on other people's heels. If you went too slow, other people were likely to tread on yours. Step by step, moment by moment, immersed in constant dhikr with the tongue and the heart, I circled the Ka'aba, as the sun rose higher and higher in the sky above the mass of pilgrims who constantly swirled round the still black cube.



When I reached our meeting-place, it was to find everyone there except Abdal-Jalil. Naturally Muhammad Abdal-Bari and Uthman and Muhammad Qasim had completed their preliminary rites some days earlier, and had been doing tawaf of the Ka'aba whenever they could do so ever since, for this is one of the best forms of dhikr that there is. It was good just to sit there quietly, after all the movement and dhikr and duas of the last few hours, waiting for the time of dhur to arrive, and watching the incessant swirl of people passing us by as they swung round and round the stillness of the Ka'aba which we were careful always to have in our line of vision, for it is a courtesy never to turn your back on the Ka'aba while you are actually in the Haram. As I gazed at this wonderful living spectacle, I could not help but silently repeat some words that I had memorised many many years before:

at the still point, there the dance is,

(The Four Quartets of T.S. Eliot)

Just when I least expected it, the adhan for dhur suddenly filled the air, and as we sat and listened to it, repeating each phrase quietly as it filled the air around us, the main swirl of the people doing tawaf continued to flow round the Ka'aba. After the last 'La ilaha illa'llah' of the adhan had filled the air and died away, many of those who were in the sheltered part of the mosque rose to their feet to do their sunnah prayers, but still the main flow of people continued to wheel round the Ka'aba, until, as the qadqamatis salat which signalled the start of the prayer was given, it finally came to a halt, as everyone dispersed and arranged themselves in concentric circles facing the Ka'aba in preparation for the prayer, all the women making their way to the areas which are set aside for the women.

For four years I had been doing the prayer, facing in the direction of the Ka'aba wherever I happened to be, without ever really appreciating what it was that I was facing. I had seen photographs of the Ka'aba and heard people describe what it is like to pray with the Ka'aba actually in sight, but nothing that I had seen or heard could have prepared me for this.

In the vast silence that now filled the Haram, everything was still except for the white doves that circled in the sky above us. Every possible space was filled with a human being, and the Ka'aba loomed high above us, almost completely filling my field of vision when I looked at it. Normally during the prayer, your gaze is directed towards the point on which your forehead will come to rest when in prostration – for the Prophet Muhammad once said that if you look up while doing the prayer, you will go blind – but when you are actually in the Haram, you are permitted to direct your gaze at the Ka'aba itself, and this was what I now did.

“Allahu Akbar!” The imam’s voice sounded clearly over the public address system. “Allahu Akbar!” echoed thousands and thousands of voices, all as one voice, and so the prayer began. This was worship of Allah as I had never before experienced it, and I sank deep into the prayer, annihilated in the concentrated stillness that filled the air of the Haram, with the black cube of the Ka’aba filling my gaze, with the hot blue sky above us, and the still white sea of ihrams lapping all around at its edges. How different this was, both inwardly and outwardly, to doing the prayer by oneself in a small room in England on a cold mid-winter’s day!

The prayer took its beautifully majestic simply defined course and came to an end, followed almost immediately by the funeral prayer for someone who had just died, but already, with the closing ‘As-salaamu-alaikum’ of the prayer, there were people circling the Ka’aba once again, as the human whirlpool reformed once again, predictably and unhurriedly, and swirled inevitably back into motion.



When I had first embraced Islam some four years earlier, I had known next to nothing about it, other than the fact that the community of Muslims whom I had joined were more knowledgeable and radiant and better behaved than any other human beings that I had ever met during my life up until then. I had embraced Islam in the hope of acquiring that knowledge and radiance and courteous behaviour, and as time passed my hopes were gradually fulfilled, as, little by little I learned about and tried to embody the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, may the blessings and peace of Allah be on him.

Understanding was not always instant, or complete, but I usually found that once I had actually done something that was part of the Prophet’s teaching, then I could understand it. The meaning of the Hajj was something that had always eluded me, and whenever I read about it, I could not understand it, or see the point of it. For three and a half years, I had had no desire to go on the Hajj, other than the feeling that I ought to do so because it is one of the five pillars of Islam, and then, once I did sincerely wish to do the Hajj, I had soon found myself on the way to Makka.

Now that I was here, actually doing the Hajj, it made perfect sense, and as soon as I did anything that was required of me, its meanings approached me from every direction. At this point in time, doing the Hajj was clearly the best and most natural course of action in the world. There was nowhere else that I wished to be, and there was nothing else that I wanted to do. As far as I was concerned, I was in exactly the right place at exactly the right time, doing exactly the right thing.



There I stood, on the Jebel Ar-Rahma, as it gradually became more and more crowded, no longer repeating the talbiya, for its time was up, but making dua after dua as they flowed into and out of my heart and onto my tongue.

Although my attention was on and in my heart, I could not help but look out across the plain of Arafah from my vantage point from time to time. It was an extraordinary sight. Thousands upon thousands of pilgrims, all dressed in white, enveloped the Jebel Ar-Rahma and the area around it in a sea of white, washing round the large island of white tents and hundreds of parked coaches and cars, while the sun slowly sank westwards through a cloudless blue sky on a hot day that was cool and vibrant and radiant with baraka and rahma.

There must have been about a million and a half people there, each with their own particular destiny and story, all gathered there from across the face of the world to share this time and place for a few hours, just on that afternoon, on that day, in that month, in that year, the 9th of Dhu’l-Hijjah in the 1397th year after the Hijrah, the Hijrah being the journey in which the Prophet Muhammad and his sincere companion Abu Bakr travelled in the way of Allah from Makka to Madina, where the first Muslim community became truly established.

It was probably the nearest actual living experience to the Last Day – when everyone who has ever lived will be brought back to life and gathered together before being sent to either the Garden or the Fire – that I had ever experienced in my life. One of the names of the Last Day is Al-Yawm al-Qiyamah, which in Arabic means ‘the Day of Standing’, since everyone will be standing there before

Allah on That Day, just as everyone was standing here before Allah right now on the Jebel Ar-Rahma and on the plain of Arafah.



For about three hours I just stood there, like everybody else, outwardly the same and with only Allah knowing what was in each of our hearts, in the Mercy and at the Mercy of Allah, and as I stood there, making all the duas I had already made at the Ka'aba again and making all the fresh duas that I could possibly think of, I paused to reflect on the meaning of it all.

During the rites of the Hajj, I had gone round in circles round the Ka'aba; I had gone back and forth between here and there between Safa and Marwa; and now I was just being still standing still here on the Jebel Ar-Rahma. And this, I reflected, is all that we ever do in life. Either we stay still in one place, or we go back and forth between two places, or we go round in circles, these simple fundamental patterns of movement and no movement interacting with each other in a myriad of different forms and combinations to form the beautifully intricate pattern of individual and collective destinies which are for ever unfolding and never quite exactly repeating themselves during each moment of existence.

Silently I stood there, filled with awe, as I reflected on the beauty and the majesty and the sheer intricacy of the creation which is alive and changing with each passing moment, never to be the same again. My awareness turned from the creation to the Creator, to the Reality in Whom everything that appears to exist has its reality, to the One Who pervades every atom in the cosmos without being contained by any thing – Who is beyond space, to the One Who has no beginning or end in time – Who is beyond time, to the One Who is not only the Inwardly Hidden but also, if we could only understand, the Outwardly Manifest, to Allah.

How little we know! Our knowledge is restricted by place and time. We have to imagine what things were like if we were not there, and even if we were present, our understanding is limited, not only by lack of perception but also because we can only really focus our attention on one thing at a time, and existence is multi-dimensional, both in the Seen and in the Unseen worlds. And as for the future, we can only imagine what lies ahead.

Allah knows it all, from the innermost depths to the outermost parts. He has always been present everywhere for as long as space and time exist, always present, before and beyond space and time, always present, with no beginning and no end. The whole creation from beginning to end is in the knowledge of Allah, from before time, for all time, beyond time.

ALLAH

Everything that had happened in my life up to this point dwindled away and faded like a dream. There was no past and no future, just the present moment, as I stood there in the presence of Allah, a frail human being dressed in two pieces of white cloth and a pair of plastic sandals, with no food and no money and no shelter, standing on a small rocky hill in the middle of the desert, in the middle of the world, in the middle of the universe, a helpless slave in the presence of his Lord.

