What is Contemplation: An Interview with Muhammad Faruque

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Muhammad Faruque is the Inayat Malik Assistant Professor and a Taft Center Fellow at the University of Cincinnati and a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University. He is the author of *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing* (2021).

Conducted by Erin Burke, a doctoral candidate at the University of Virginia and a Research Assistant at the Journal of Contemplative Studies*.*

JCS: What is contemplation?

MF: Contemplation for me is a cognitive, spiritual activity in which the mind, body, and spirit work in unison to transform the self. There are a number of terms to talk about contemplation in the Islamic tradition. Among them are two that are very prominent, namely, *fikr* and *tafakkur*. Both of these terms can be translated as meditation and contemplation. There is another word called *murāqabah*, which means basically watching yourself at every moment. And there is a further word called *muḥāsabah*, which translates roughly as self-accounting or something akin to "self-examination."

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So, as you can imagine, similar to other religious and wisdom traditions such as Buddhism, there is not just one concept or one word, rather there is a cluster of concepts to discuss contemplation in Islam. And they also go hand in hand with an ethical lifestyle. That is to say, it is not just some fifteen minutes of your time that you want to set aside for meditation every day. It is more about integrating a "contemplative attitude" into your lifestyle and daily habits. Contemplation is also a beautiful, serene practice that refines our spiritual perception. It raises our awareness of the divine presence within us, and it also calms the agitations of the self. So, when it comes to the practice of contemplation in Islam, or more specifically in Sufism which is the spiritual dimension of Islam, just like in Buddhism, there is first of all the idea of having your concentration focused on a given object. In Buddhist terms, this is more like *samatha*. But then there is also *vipassana* in Buddhism. In Sufism, there is something similar. I mentioned the word *fikr* already, which is the word for contemplation, or the activity of contemplation. But there is also another word which rhymes very well with *fikr*, and which is called *dhikr*. *Dhikr* literally means "invocation," and it is more like *samatha*. It is a kind of technique of focusing on a given object, and that object can be a sacred formula, for example a mantra. Now *dhikr* is combined with *fikr*, i.e., contemplation. They are inseparable from each other. But contemplation, or *fikr* or *tafakkur*, provides us with an opportunity to know ourselves, to know the nature of reality—the nature of the universe and our place in it. Overall, contemplative practices in Sufism are meant to awaken our inner consciousness through which we can experience our cognitive non-separation from the nonhuman world. The fruits of contemplation can be reaped in terms of an eco-friendly vision of life and action.

JCS: How does contemplation intersect with your research?

MF: Yeah, that is an interesting question. I am currently completing a book on Sufism, climate change, and ecological living. It basically centers around three concepts: interconnectedness, ecological living, and the anthropocosmic self. Broadly, I try to argue that when you think about climate change, as it is portrayed in popular media as well as influential venues such as the IPCC, you notice that it is presented as a kind of engineering problem that can be resolved through various technological fixes, economic solutions, and a pursuit of renewables. But this is a very narrow way of framing the climate crisis because it defines climate change only in terms of physical phenomena observable and measurable by science. Yet climate change also has a cultural, social, and ethical dimension. It represents our social, cultural, and spiritual predicaments and aspirations, which shape our perspectives on self, society, and humanity's place on earth. Now there is no denying that climate has a physical dimension because no one

cultural aspirations in the Anthropocene?" you begin to see that it involves all kinds of questions about human flourishing, leading to the question, "What is the human project ultimately about?"

In my book, I argue that we need to promote the idea of "ecological living" through an anthropocosmic vision of the self. In the anthropocosmic vision, everything is connected to everything else. Unlike the Cartesian view, the anthropocosmic self transcends the subject-object dualism, which tends to give undue privilege to the mind (incidentally, the anthropocosmic self also overcomes anthropocentrism). The guiding feature of the anthropocosmic self is its ability to realize oneness with the rest of the natural world, since in such a perspective the identity of being a particular "I" with a particular body-mind complex is transcended. Ultimately, this book provides a corrective to the problem-solution approach mentioned above by proposing a new theory of the human and the more-than-human world relationship based on a cross-cultural, multidisciplinary approach that draws on insights from both Sufism and the environmental humanities. Alongside developing a theory of what it calls the "interconnected universe," this study also argues that Sufi contemplative practices support and foster an active engagement toward the planet's well-being and an ecologically viable way of life. It further argues that climate change forces us to reimagine "what it means to be modern" and how one should pursue "ecological living" in the face of frequent environmental disasters.

On the one hand, I make a theoretical argument, but on the other, I also propose a set of spiritual and contemplative practices designed to experience "interconnectedness" firsthand. This is because oftentimes these ideas do not translate into practical vision because they remain trapped in the mind. They only become real when we really try to engage with nature. I teach a variety of courses on climate change, and sometimes I assign students to write what I call a "nature experience" essay. This is an essay where students have to spend a few hours in nature and simply try to experience their surrounding phenomena. By immersing themselves in nature, they realize how different that is from their everyday experience of the world where they remain rather oblivious of nature. Contemplation plays an extremely crucial role here because it is through contemplation that we first of all get a deeper awareness of ourselves. Then this deeper self-awareness enables us to discover, in a concrete sense, a connection with everything else. It is a gradual process. So, when I talk about ecological living, I have in mind contemplative practices above everything else, because such practices transform our everyday consciousness, which is now used to the Cartesian habit of mind that sees nature or the nonhuman world as an object, or in the worst-case scenario, a resource to be exploited.

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JCS: And what excites you about future directions that are emerging in the field?

MF: There are a couple of things. As far as I am aware, even a few years ago there was no journal called the *Journal of Contemplative Studies*. There has been a lot of research on meditation, especially in light of the interest expressed by the Dalai Lama and other Buddhists concerning the interface between Buddhism and science. Consequently, there was a lot of interest from the scientific community in the West to explore meditation and its effect on health and wellbeing. There was a lot of research on mindfulness as well, leading to books such as *McMindfulness*, but there was practically nothing on contemplation proper. So, when I first heard of the *Journal of Contemplative Studies*, I was pleasantly surprised because I thought, "this is going to be a groundbreaking event."

Also, there are now conferences being held on contemplation, partly because people realized that meditation is commodified in such a way that sometimes it simply does not help. I hope contemplation will not have to embrace such a fate. There is a conference—the second conference of the International Society for Contemplative Research— on contemplation in Italy next year. Also worth mentioning is Brown University's Contemplative Studies program, where they try to explore contemplation in a classroom setting, which is of course very challenging because traditionally, if you are a Buddhist, you would experience a real taste of contemplation in a *sangha* in the world, when you are living with other spiritual seekers or within a spiritual community. So, it is very hard to show students the real effects of contemplation in our life. But my sense is that people are now thinking about different ways to come up with innovative programs to show how contemplation can make a difference in our modern life. Some of these developments are really exciting.

JCS: Do you have any favorite books, or books you'd recommend for people who are interested in contemplation?

MF: Sure. There is a book called *Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action* edited by Yusuf Ibish and Peter Wilson. It is a collection of essays by different scholars as well as different spiritual authorities from a variety of traditions from Vedanta to Sufism, and everything in between like Buddhism and even Native American traditions. It is really a good book. It is not very well known, but I believe it is still available in the libraries. Some of the essays are really worth going over and reading. And then there is another book called *Sufi Meditation and Contemplation* by Scott Kugle. It contains translations of three classic Sufi texts from Mughal India. These texts elucidate meditation practices and the resulting effects. If someone is looking for a kind of manual, how meditation (contemplation) is actually performed in Sufism, this book has a lot to offer. There is also another book called *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study* by a psychologist called Malik Badri. That is also a good book to consider.

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Together, these books bring out the idea of developing what some people have called “spiritual intelligence.” I think this is a key idea as we think of contemplative practices. Because we live in an era where there is excessive focus on the analytic frame of mind—I mean computational and analytic ways of getting around things. And this is especially true if you think of AI and its recent developments in Silicon Valley. People are often mesmerized by these developments. So, they now try to redefine human beings in terms of machines by reasoning how our mind works exactly like the machine. And they think that through various forms of algorithm we can now replicate our mental activities. In this way, you can create better human beings—not better in the moral sense, but more clever, intelligent, and ultimately possessing super intelligence. I think this is really myopic. I also do research on artificial intelligence, and I recently gave a talk at Drake University on Ray Kurzweil, who is one of the most famous Silicon Valley gurus and someone very influential when it comes to Big Tech. The analytic frame of mind, i.e., using mathematics and analyzing things in a bit-by-bit fashion, works fine for empirical science. But our intelligence, and more importantly, our humanity, is not defined by the analytic frame of mind. Human intelligence also has a contemplative dimension. But unfortunately, this is not something we learn when we opt for STEM subjects in college. I think the initiative to underscore the importance of contemplation is really a key move here. The more we learn about the significance of contemplation, the more we realize that human beings are not defined by their computational intelligence. We realize that there is something called spiritual intelligence, which can be developed through contemplation. Because it is ultimately through contemplation that we can come to understand—we can come to experience—a kind of oneness with all things, with the natural world, and with other human beings. That does not happen easily. It does not happen just by reading a philosophical, or even a spiritual treatise. It happens by penetrating the deeper levels of our consciousness. The deeper we penetrate into ourselves, the more we realize that there is an underlying oneness with everything else—something very hard to explain through words. But it does not mean that there will not be any difference between human beings or between a human being and a tree, rather it should give us an insight that somehow there is a deep connection between me as a human being and the being of a tree, or even the being of a stone. That is the essence of contemplation as far as I am concerned. This is important to emphasize because ordinarily, the subject-object dichotomy that characterizes much of our thinking, that is, the way we do science, gives us the idea of control and manipulation, of looking at things in terms of resources or an “it.” Heidegger also criticized this attitude, which characterizes our understanding of technology. That is, limiting nature and

All right, I will end here by just saying that contemplation can be a real source of happiness in this day and age when there is so much confusion about what makes life meaningful.

JCS: Excellent book suggestions and ideas to think about. Thank you so much for chatting with us.

> ***What is Contemplation?*** *is an ongoing series that interviews leading scholars in Contemplative Studies to address this driving question.*

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