

Guidance in Nature

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And He has cast great mountains in the earth lest it might be convulsed with you, and rivers and roads that you may go aright; and landmarks; and by the stars they find the right way. (al-Nahl, 16/15-16)

The term "guidance" always brings to one's mind the notion of spiritual instruction and direction. However, in the case of God Almighty and His constant and widespread grace, we cannot confine this term to such a narrow sense. A study of the great organization of the cosmos and the intricate detail of our own creation makes us reach the conclusion that the system of existence is founded on a set of essential principles in which every creation and phenomenon has its particular place and role. The Creator has guided every one of His creations according to its nature and composition and has prepared a program for every aspect and phase of its existence.

It is not possible for a creature to acquire existence or reach perfection and yet be independent of God's nurturing influence; giving new life, bestowing bounties and conferring favours are amongst the distinctive prerogatives of the Creator, and the signs of this invigoration and :constant bestowal and favour are clearly evident and manifest in every creation

Existential or universal guidance (hidayat-e takwini) .1

Muslim thinkers unanimously agree that within the scheme of creation, God guides every creature towards its physical perfection; from the smallest cell, whose internal processes are governed by a special system, to the most magnificent phenomena in the cosmos – despite all their wonders, whenever they attain a certain station, they require and receive the guidance reserved for that station.

Indeed, everything is in utter need of Him so that not only may He allow it to achieve its inner potential, but also so that he may gently coax it along the correct direction of development through His permeating radiance. If it was not for this guidance, the entire universe would never be able to stand fast and become stable – in fact, it would not be able to even realise a .tinge of existence

Legislative or prescriptive guidance (hidayat-e tashri'i) .2

Just as the order of life has originated from the boundless wisdom and knowledge of God, guidance about the purpose of man in the system of existence is likewise from God, because the necessary consequence of life and intellect is to have an objective and goal. Aside from the intuitive knowledge that is inherent in every human being and which assists him in recognizing certain truths so that he may freely, without any preconceptions, choose his path based on this essential inner faculty (fitra), external guidance that would strengthen and support the intellect and the fitra is also necessary. This is so that he may reform the rebellious and immoderate elements in his temperament as well as protect his intellect and fitra from perversion. Just as God Almighty guided man to seek physical perfection through the instinct of self interest, He likewise guided him to reach human perfection through the agency of legislative or prescriptive directives, in addition to the guidance of the fitra. This is because when existential guidance encounters self interest, it requires some assistance. God appointed Prophets (A) to come to the aid of man, to take his hand and introduce him to the subtle cognitive abilities latent in his own fitra and to enliven his positive and noble inclinations and motivations and inspire him to use these faculties in the manner they were meant to be used, and point out to him all the impediments that might obstruct his journey towards perfection. It should be noted that this guidance is a manifestation of God's grace and a preparation to examine the worthiness of the individual and to determine the kind of reward he will earn through his actions; it is not meant to divest man of choice or the power of independent rational thought and to extinguish the radiance of his free will, rather this is the manner in which the measure of the excellences and failures of individuals is manifested. Every human being can use the internal and external Divine guidance at his disposal to ennoble his actions and ascend the ladder towards intellectual maturity and perfection. Indeed, the path to perfection does not accept stagnation and man's ascent will not take place until he consciously takes steps to fundamentally transform himself.

Guidance about the needs of life (hidayat-e zisti) .3

When we look at the life forms that inhabit the world as a whole and analyse their various aspects, we find that all members of this system occupy a position appropriate to their specific status. And when a particular subset of the creation is subjected to the laws of nature it starts to flourish in its preordained direction. From this perspective we can clearly see the general equilibrium that exists in the world between these members of creation (in the human, animal and plant kingdoms), all of whom possess their own intrinsic guidance.

When we analyse the characteristics of animals we conclude that their natural constitutions and habitats are totally different from that of plant matter, because nature does not place their sustenance at their disposal; rather animals have to ceaselessly forage and hunt to provide food for themselves, and obviously this necessitates the development of the appropriate tools and appendages for the task.

However, man who has reached higher stations and who possesses a determined and free will, is still at a lower level when it comes to his instincts. His physical constitution is comparatively weak and poorly equipped and he is much less able to withstand physical trauma than animals; indeed, it takes him many years to become self-sufficient and able to cater for his own needs. These particular characteristics which embrace all creatures are the means to the gradual progression towards perfection.

The verse above discusses a type of guidance that helps man in his daily life, and sheds light on some of the mysterious realities of creation. God the Almighty, who is the source of mercy, and whose grace is continually flowing throughout the cosmos, has not neglected to create a variety of natural features and combinations of structures in the complex systems of the world which serve to guide its inhabitants during the course of their earthly lives.

The Creator of the cosmos - that grand Designer and Possessor of limitless power - has granted to His creatures special and wondrous perceptive powers and sensitivity so that they are able to live and flourish to achieve perfection. These abilities allow them to adopt the correct path in the journey that each must undertake in this world, and guide them in the course of their amazing lives.

,When Musa (A) was asked by Fir'awn to introduce his Lord, he replied

قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى

Our Lord is He Who gave to everything its creation, then guided it (to its goal) [Ta Ha, 20/50]. Animals and birds have an acute sense of direction by which they accurately navigate distances. During the course of their lives, birds use this mysterious sense to easily move between their nests and remote feeding places without ever losing their way back. The knowledge that every creature possesses is a bounty that has been placed in its essence and the majesty and grandeur of creation is amply manifested by these wondrous abilities that we see in different creatures.

Migratory birds sometimes travel across hundreds of kilometres to reach their destination, where they live for a long time before flying back along the same route until they unerringly

return to their starting point.

What kind of compass do these birds use, that is so faultless and accurate, to be able to cross vast distances, stay in foreign lands for several months and then return back to their point of origin? Even today human science has not been able to completely unravel that mystery.

Many scientists have conducted a variety of experiments to try to understand more about the sense of direction that all birds possess and they have not been able to inactivate it in an animal (even by introducing different factors to confuse it); the birds are even able to use this calculated system to produce many other wondrous (acrobatic) movements within themselves

which is a product of the same unknown system.

During their migration, these birds form aerial flocks and converge from different places and sometimes change places with one another creating a beautiful and awe-inspiring pattern in flight. What instrument has been placed in their nature and constitution that allows them to fly

in perfectly efficient formations without colliding with one another?

Consider airplanes, which possess many intricate components and sensitive and advanced instruments; when they perform air manoeuvres, they could never gather and fly together in close proximity in these vast numbers and safely perform the various manoeuvres that birds

effortlessly exhibit.

Often, even modern airplanes, which undergo rigorous testing and are put through planned simulations in an attempt to cope with any eventualities, have had accidents and fatal crashes

when they participated in aerial displays.

Apart from birds, other animals and insects also follow established systems and exhibit many forms of mysterious and unfathomable behaviour; to fulfil their needs they make use of astonishing locating abilities which are unique to their own species. Animals have been blindfolded and relocated hundreds of kilometres away from their normal habitat, and yet are

amazingly able to return unerringly to their homes.

:However, according to the Qur'an

وَخُلِقَ الْإِنْسَانُ ضَعِيفًا

And man is created weak. (al-Nisa', 4/27)

Man is relatively weak physically and has no internal direction/location system to speak of. At the same time he possesses an efficient and creative brain and a powerful intellect that is

vastly superior to every other creature.

In any case, the Divine hands fashioned natural phenomena to make up for this deficiency in

human bodies, so that they would serve man as beacons and signposts for him, and alert and protect him on his travels from possible dangers on his journey.

In ancient times the mode of travelling was confined to pack animals. Often, during journeys which were undertaken across deserts and plains which were devoid of mountains and hills, travellers would lose their way and become exposed to severe perils. In many cases, they strayed into unknown trails and lost their lives as a result. However, on routes which were flanked by mountains on one side, there was less likelihood of people getting lost because they could use them mountains as a guiding landmark to reach their destinations.

The verses under study make clear that in order to compensate for the lack of an internal radar system within man – a system that exists in various forms in other living creatures – God prepared for man a natural system to tell direction in the shape of mountains and hills and springs and rivers and clefts inside mountains so that when man travelled in the land from one place to another, these unchanging features would serve as landmarks and signs for him to easily plot his course of travel.

Even in our times, with the advances in scientific knowledge, airplane pilots, besides relying on their electronic systems to locate their position, also use mountain ranges, rivers and geographical features to check their course.

This is one of the innumerable blessings of God and is a testimony to the various uses and benefits which these natural phenomena afford to the inhabitants of the earth according to God's plan, one of which is to guide and direct human beings. The benefits of these natural features are clearly visible when the sun shines forth warmly and brightly in the day; both the heat and the light of this magnificent heavenly body assist the inhabitants of the earth in their movements and travels.

For travel in the night also, God has created a system of stars in the heavens whose light and sparkle guide the inhabitants of the earth in the land and the seas. The system of the movement of the planets, stars, sun and moon as they follow their ordained orbits, all serve to :guide man

وَبِالنَّجْمِ هُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ

And by the stars they find the right way. (al-Nahl, 16/16)

A study of the horizons and a survey of how beneficial the various natural phenomena are for mankind is in itself a source of spiritual inspiration and knowledge about God.

We know that the cosmos is never-ending and therefore knowing and understanding all of its

secrets is also an infinitely difficult task; man's advancing knowledge is still unable to explain many of the mysteries behind the phenomena that have been created for him. Despite every one of these signs and systems, which can be witnessed and perceived in nature, existing in such exalted planes, they cannot be compared to the intricate and complex constitution of the human being and the human intellect. For an individual who has intelligence and insight –

which are also granted by God creative will – this matter is very instructive.

The existence of these landmarks throughout one's journey from one place to another is a matter of comfort and peace of mind, and everyone can select the easiest path to reach their destination across nature's mountains, rivers and gullies. Additionally, in travelling through these natural features they may contemplate on these signs of God and analyse them; as they marvel at the many amazing sights scattered throughout the world, they can witness the power and planning of God, most High. In every single atom in the expanse of nature they will see a

testimony to the existence of the Source of creation and be thus inspired and guided.

:The Qur'an states

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ مَهْدًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ فِيهَا سُبُلًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

He Who made the earth a resting-place for you, and made ways in it for you so that you may be guided aright (al-Zukhruf, 43/9)

From the term "tahtadun" – guided aright – in the two previous verses, both meaning can be derived and from both we can get guidance; we benefit from mountains and rivers and natural trails in the course of our journeys and travel to our destinations without the anxiety and fear of losing our way and we also benefit from witnessing these grand and wondrous living phenomena, and through them appreciate the greater Reality and the needless, unique and omnipotent Source, Whose qualities are dimly reflected in man himself.

It is true that the understanding of a physiologist or curious scientist who examines the intricate inner workings of an animal is far removed from that of a layman who makes a simple study of the animal, however, even though both look at creation from different angles, they .come to the same conclusion