

# Islam

THE FAITH OF  
LOVE AND HAPPINESS



Haidar Bagir



“This book is greatly needed at a time when the profound vision of the Sufi tradition has been marginalised in much Islamic discourse. Sufi’s have consistently emphasised the crucial fact that mercy and compassion lie at the heart of the religious quest and this message is vitally important in our dangerously polarised world.”

**Karen Armstrong**, author of best selling books, *Muhammad: A Prophet for our time*, *Islam: A Short History*, *A History of God* and *Fields of Blood*.

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“This practical book presents the inner depths of Sufi teachings in a way that is directly relevant to our constant efforts to reach for happiness.”

**Prof Komaruddin Hidayat**, Islamic scholar and bestselling author of *Life’s Journey*



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Islam: The Faith of Love and Happiness

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## Dedication

*This little book is dedicated to my children—  
Muhammad Irfan, Mustafa Kamil, Ali Riza and  
Syarifa Rahima, in the hope that Allah bestows  
you all with sincere love for Allah, family, friends,  
fellow humans and all elements of the universe.*

...They (the *Anṣār*) love those who have migrated to them (the *Muhājirūn*) and do not covet what has been given them; they even prefer them above themselves though poverty be their own lot. And whosoever are preserved from their own greed, such are the ones that shall attain to a happy state! (*muflihūn*). (*al-Ḥashr* 59: 9)



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## Preface

LOOKING BACK, I cannot recall a time when I was not interested in the issue of love in religion. As for happiness, although my sentimental temperament has always been concerned with it, this intensified when I experienced symptoms of depression for the first time. Yes, indeed, I went through that experience. Although, I suspect that the symptoms were more related to biological or hormonal factors.

At that time I had just passed my half-century, so understandably, I suppose, it was a phenomenon commonly called the andropause. Although my life—like any other man's life—was not entirely without problems, I felt that God had given me so many blessings. I have felt quite happy throughout my life, being raised in a loving family and raising my own family today. Thank God, I am also typically unflustered in the face of problems.

However, the symptoms of depression were still symptoms that had to be overcome. I had refused to see a doctor and take any mood-restoring medication. I felt, as long as I was able to tackle the problems, I would try

to find other ways to solve them, and these symptoms would disappear by themselves. And, thank God, that's exactly what happened. I tried to keep going back to God each time the uncomfortable depressive feelings came knocking—there were times when such feelings attacked rather frequently. I tried to assuage my spiritual restlessness by redoubling my efforts to find answers to various unresolved transcendental issues. Aside from that, I tried tirelessly to seek meanings that I could give to my life, since depressive symptoms would always somehow involve the lack of meaning in life. I suppose I need to briefly say here that my life, which was relatively smooth, has perhaps played a role in the origin of my depression, because—at one point—I felt I was losing excitement in life. I have, more or less, achieved everything I ever expected in life, so what else would I need to pursue?

Due to my sentimental temperament, I tend to have empathy towards others—not only for those in need, but even for the well-to-do—who live a materially prosperous life in the cities but seem to lack meaning in their lives. Even on those few occasions when I had the opportunity to stay in the USA, I felt there were a lot of people who looked prosperous but were actually losing their vigour since there was not enough meaning in their lives. From quite early on in life, I have been keen to help people, within my own limitations, to overcome their suffering and misery, as well as in their search for meaning in life.

I think my religious and academic interest in a kind of Islamic mysticism—Sufism—has also largely contributed here, which may be a consequence of my sentimental temperament. Seeking answers for my spiritual restlessness, I found that the main concern of Sufism

is indeed to address the question of spiritual thirst: the meaning of life. What is life? Where is it from? Where is it heading? In addition to this, if studied properly, Sufism is a spiritual understanding of religion based on relationships of reciprocal love between man and God, between man and his fellow men, as well as between man and the entire universe.

The more I learned and existentially internalized the teachings, the more convinced I became that Sufism is the remedy for the human problems of our times. Aside from addressing spiritual problems, it also deals with the lengthy conflicts that plague mankind. The problem of intolerance in all fields, the tendency towards an increasingly dominant selfishness, and the frail bond of human brotherhood.

Then, gradually, the issues of happiness and love began to dominate the various discourses that I conveyed throughout my daily life, to the extent that, upon hearing me speak at a national conference, a foreign observer said that my speech was like that of a pastor preaching a sermon.

Finally, in 2008, I was interviewed by *Kompas Daily*. In the interview I spoke about the importance of a paradigm shift in the religious understanding of Islam from a law-oriented religion to a love-oriented one. Because, as argued by phenomenologists of religion, including Gerard van der Leeuw, Islam is in fact no less than Christianity in its orientation towards love. This is confirmed by Annemarie Schimmel, who identifies the evidence to this effect from the works of Sufis throughout the history of Islamic thought. I see that these inaccuracies in understanding the paradigm affect not only those outside Islam, but

also Muslims themselves. Only through this paradigm shift will Islam be able to show its real face as ‘a mercy to the worlds’, as opposed to the current reality in which Islam is mainly being portrayed as an exclusively political religion, sometimes even a violent one. (Of course I am also aware that such an image of Islam is partly shaped by both misunderstandings and misrepresentations on the part of some international media, especially the Western media.)

This book is the result of my reflections on two matters—love and happiness. Originally, there were two separate collections of writings that I later combined due to the similarity of their subject matter. Six chapters in the ‘Introduction’ try to explain both of these, while examining the relationship between the two. And, since this book tries to link love with happiness, the discussion in the ‘Happiness’ section is limited to topics of love for and contentment with Allah, and love for one’s fellow human beings as the source of that happiness. I have also added substantial content, revised and rearranged the work to help the book read well in its current form.

I deliberately cite poignant stories at the beginning of each section to warm the heart, add to the spiritual impact, as well as to pave the way for a pleasant and readable prelude to the subject matter. I have also incorporated extracts from the original writings of some philosophers and Sufis, and I hope this simple book will help readers to reflect further on the meaning of their lives, and also become a guide along our path to achieve the true happiness that we all desire.

I hope that aside from being an accessible non-academic work, this book can give an idea to the reader

that Islam is genuinely a love-oriented religion. Moreover, the law-oriented part of our religion, although no less important, should be placed in the context of the *love* orientation which is rooted in the heart of this religion.

Finally, I would like to thank the Mizan Group for publishing most of my writings in this book; Lite FM, that has for several years given me the opportunity to explore these issues in a programme broadcast every Friday morning (*Lite is Beautiful*); Pak Cecep Romli, who helped me with the editing and adding the words of wisdom; the staff of Noura Books, who helped me with the trifles of pre-printing; Sayed Hyder for editing and retranslating this book into English, as well as providing very valuable input, and again Mizan Publishers, who were willing to publish the original Indonesian version of this book.

May Allah register this modest work as a good deed on my way towards His pleasure.

**Haidar Bagir**



Part I



*Dive into Love,  
Seize Happiness*





## Happiness as the Highest Goal

**H**APPINESS (*SA'ĀDAH*) REPRESENTS the highest goal of mankind during their tenure here in this world. It can be reasoned that happiness is the main concern of everyone on earth. Indeed, every human endeavour is intended to assist in obtaining happiness. This appears in numerous verses of the Qur'an which place the joy of life – both in this world and in the afterlife – as the purpose of human existence (creation):

*Whoever behaves righteously, whether male or female, while they are a believer, We will surely cause them to live a good life, and We will surely give them a reward better than what they do.*  
(*al-Nahl* 16: 97)

Ibn 'Abbas, the main *mufassir* (exegete) among the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him), interprets the phrase 'a good life' (*ḥayāh ṭayyibah*) as happiness (in this world). Indeed, if we humans follow rather than violate our nature, we are truly created for happiness (*ḥalāl*):

*And by the soul and by Him Who perfectly proportioned it, and imbued it with (the consciousness of) its evil and its piety: He who purifies it will prosper/be happy (aflaḥa), and he who suppresses it will be ruined. (al-Shams 91: 7–10)*

The problem is that there is a mistaken perception amongst some people in Muslim societies that if we want to be happy in the Hereafter, we have to live miserably in the world. Sometimes this belief stems from a hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him) which states that life is a prison for the believer, while it is heaven for unbelievers. Or part of another hadith which states that people who laugh much in this world will end up crying a lot in the Hereafter. So do not be surprised if there are some people who think that people of strong faith/creed must maintain a grim or melancholic disposition. Is this belief really sound?

A good example of how a faithful Muslim leads his life, and lives in this world with serenity, is in the life of Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the grandson of the Prophet (peace be upon him). He was known to have a neat and clean appearance, well-groomed and elegant, in short, very pleasing to the eye. So much so that his attire became a source of vilification by those who detested him.

Once a disbeliever who despised Ḥasan b. ‘Alī intercepted him and said: ‘Your grandfather (Prophet Muhammad) had said, the world is a prison for a believer. And yet you live in it with so much ease.’

Ḥasan b. ‘Alī responded: ‘My life, although good and enjoyable in this world, when compared to the joy

and happiness that I will get in the Hereafter, is like Hell. Imagine the pleasure I would obtain if I enter His Heaven? While your life is hard in this world, and will be harder still in the Hereafter.'

While at the same time, according to the *āyah* (16:97) above, those who are pious and faithful, will be awarded a far better life of happiness as compared to what they were already given in this world.

Ḥasan b. 'Alī's outlook and deportment can thus be understood in the context of the aforementioned *āyah*. According to him, happiness in this world is at a far lower relative level when compared to life in the Hereafter, resulting in what the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: it may aptly be compared to the life of a prisoner.

There is another interesting *āyah* concerning how a believer leads a life full of happiness in this world:

*[O Prophet], announce glad tidings to those who believe and do righteous deeds, that for them are gardens beneath which rivers flow. Their fruits will have such resemblance to those of the earth that whenever they will be provided with those fruits they will say: 'It was this that was granted to us on earth before.' For them there shall be pure spouses, and there they shall abide forever. (al-Baqarah 2: 25)*

It is important to draw our attention to the expression used by the inhabitants of Paradise, 'It was this that was granted to us on earth before.' Indirectly, this verse is implying that someone who would go to Heaven would have already tasted the pleasures of Paradise while they

were in this world. The people of Paradise will find that whatever they receive or experience, they would have — to a certain extent — received and experienced while they were in the world.

Again, in conclusion, those who are of the faith and do good deeds are not only guaranteed by Allah to be among those upon whom happiness is conferred in the Hereafter, but also in this world. This is how a Muslim should approach life, by appreciating the sources of happiness in it; in other words, we should live a life of happiness in this world in order to reach a far higher level of happiness in the afterlife. Exactly as mentioned in His statement:

*Seek, by means of the wealth that Allah has granted you, the Abode of the Hereafter, but forget not your share in this world! (al-Qaṣaṣ 28: 77)*



## What is Happiness?

IT IS DOUBTFUL that anyone would disagree that the purpose of his or her life on this earth is to achieve happiness (*sa'ādah*). Although happiness may be understood differently by different people—as psychological, intellectual or spiritual—all agree with regards to its nature. It is happiness that makes humans passionate, excited and full of life, while encouraging us to spread tranquillity, peace, meaningfulness and fulfilment. Meanwhile, the opposite of happiness, i.e. misery (*shaqāwah*) is in the same league as anxiety, chaos and a life devoid of meaning.

Happiness in the Islamic tradition is referred to as *surūr*, *farah* (joy) and, more fundamentally, *sa'ādah*, *tīb* and *falāh*.<sup>1</sup> It must be emphasized that happiness is not the

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1. *Sa'ādah* means 'happiness' or 'success'. While the word *tīb* is derived from the same word as *tayyibah*, which means 'blissful'; see Qur'an, *al-Nahl* 16: 97, and the explanation below. For an enlightening discussion of the meaning of *falāh* as happiness, see Jalaluddin Rakhmat's *Reaching Happiness*, published by Simbiosia Rekatama Media, 2009, pp. 24–27.

same as an assortment of pleasures. It is perfectly possible for one to lead a life of pleasures, without being happy. Happiness also does not mean the absence of hardship or suffering. This is because suffering may come and go, but they do not undermine the existence of happiness. This is what is referred to as *underlying happiness* (happiness that always exists in our lives).

Nor is happiness the same as ephemeral moments of pleasure. Such moments come without any assurance that they may not be immediately succeeded by a feeling of emptiness; nor are such moments free from anxiety about the prospect of a void after the pleasure is gone. Therefore, such pleasure never really takes root in the depths of the heart. Rather, it is more akin to something perfunctory floating on the surface of the superficiality of our lives.

Seen and felt through the foundation of underlying happiness, whatever happens on the surface of our lives will penetrate the heart as an entity that brings us positive meaning, reassuring us and bringing us happiness. It is possible that we may be struck with adversity and grief, but having the belief that everything in our life is essentially good, positive and for our well-being, will help us remain undaunted. Happiness gives a more enduring vision of peace and tranquillity. This is why some people identify happiness with 'enduring virtues' (*al-bāqiyāt al-sālihāt*) as revealed by Him:

*Wealth and children are an adornment of the life of the world. But the enduring virtues are the best in the sight of your Lord in reward, and far better a source of hope. (al-Kahf 18: 46)*

*Al-bāqiyāt al-ṣālihāt* are nothing but good deeds that one does for the good of others, often at the cost of sacrificing our own interest(s), providing a strong foundation for a sustainable and enduring underlying happiness.

Indeed, happiness is neither physical nor psychological—if *psyche* is understood superficially to be merely the collective indicators of cerebral-consciousness. Happiness is profoundly spiritual in nature—not necessarily of the ritual kind—but rather that associated with the heart. Spirituality is the force within humans that is not only superior to the cerebral intellectual faculty, but also surpasses emotions and feelings which—despite being linked to the heart—have yet to overcome their preliminary instability and imbalance. Indeed, emotions and feelings have all the ingredients to be stable and bring peace, tranquillity and happiness, but the combination does not always occur in suitable proportions.

When these emotions are stable, no occurrence outside of our hearts can disturb the state of balance that has been achieved, which is this underlying happiness. There would be no joy so unrestrained as to backfire, opening the possibility of subsequent misery, nor any sorrow so immense that would shatter the foundation of our happiness. Nor would any events in our transient life have so deep an effect as to upset our happiness. Just as a rock flung into shallow waters produces large ripples but in the deep ocean the same rock will hardly disturb its tranquil surface.

Indeed, happiness is intrinsic—residing in our hearts—not extrinsic or dependent on the fleeting occurrences in our daily lives. For those who have achieved this

underlying happiness, anything can happen in one's 'external' life, while the state of happiness remains stable. For those who have it, comfort and adversity are relative and neither have their own independent meaning. Relative to the underlying happiness, there is no adversity. Once placed on the foundation of this happiness, everything becomes a cause of happiness. Pleasure and pain become limited to outward appearances—or packaging. In reality, they are invariably meant to bring happiness. This is what makes many people state: at its heart happiness (and misery) is a product of perception. If we perceive anything positively, it will contribute to our happiness, though its outer appearance or packaging may look like hardship. Conversely, if we perceive anything negatively, it can give birth to misery, despite its beautiful outer appearance or packaging.

On top of that, we can say that sadness is something that is truly necessary in order to identify and feel happiness. People who have never felt sorrow or worry would be immune or desensitized towards happiness. A simple inconvenience can be the basis on which we can truly feel and appreciate happiness. *Sayyidunā 'Alī, karram Allāh wajhah* (may Allah ennoble his countenance), once stated: 'A person will not feel the sweetness of happiness (*sa'ādah*), till he tastes the bitterness of grief (*shaqāwah*).' It may be appropriate to note that, although the word *shaqāwah* is often regarded as the opposite of *sa'ādah* and of other words that express happiness, *shaqāwah*, unlike *sa'ādah*, should never be understood as having the possibility of perpetuity. God's affection is so infinite that it closes all possibilities for perpetual *shaqāwah* or eternal misery. However, *shaqāwah* is always seen as

## What is Happiness?

the precursor to *sa'ādah*. In other words, *sa'ādah* is the principle of human life, while *shaqāwah* is an exception, *shaqāwah* is required merely as a yardstick, through which one can identify and appreciate happiness. At the very least, *shaqāwah* can be seen as God's means of instructing and guiding us so that we are driven to be better.

WHAT DOES ISLAM teach us about the pursuit of happiness?

How can we gain true happiness in this life before the next?

Find the answers in this eye-opening guide, that will show you how to create meaning in your daily life and become an intimate of God, by one of Indonesia's most prominent living spiritual teachers.

Through touching stories, humorous anecdotes and profound insights into the spiritual realm that draw on sacred Islamic teachings, Dr Bagir shines a brilliant light into the darkness that all too often overwhelms us.

Consisting of twenty nine short and inspirational chapters, this work will take you on a spiritual quest to overcome the maladies of your soul and help you experience true happiness.

Haidar Bagir is an influential Islamic scholar and spiritual master based in Indonesia. He earned his MA from Harvard University, and his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Indonesia. He has been listed among *The 500 Most Influential Muslims* by The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre for several years in a row. He has written a number of popular books, his most recent being *Learning to Live from Rumi*.

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