

# AL-ITQĀN

JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

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**Volume: 5**

**Issue No. 1**

**February 2021**

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eISSN:26008432

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Published by:  
IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia  
P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Phone (+603) 6196-5014, Fax: (+603) 6196-6298  
Website: <http://iiumpress.iium.edu.my/bookshop>

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## Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī's Concept of *Ibtilā'*: Its application to Stress Management

Che Amnah Bahari\*

Waleed Fekri Faris\*\*

Mardiana Mohamad\*\*\*

### Abstract

Spiritual handling in stressful situation plays a vital role in revitalizing the affected persons. Since the beginning, counselling and psychotherapy's main approaches have been overlooking religion and spirituality as factors that influence human psyche. The contemporary counselling approaches focus on changes in emotion, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of their clients. Spirituality and religiosity were considered as unscientific components which cannot be measured objectively. Yet, due to the failure of some contemporary approaches in handling overly complex problems of human beings or *ibtilā'* in these modern days, there has been an increasing interest in the role of spirituality and religion in psychotherapy. Historically, the great Muslim scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī in his *Mathnawī* has provided numerous couplets towards the healing process. This paper aims to explore al-Rūmī's concepts of *al-ibtilā'* and its relevancy in stress management. It also discusses his thought mentioned in his poems, stories, Qur'ānic citation and religious observance in life. The applicability and advantages of al-Rūmī's philosophy to an individual's management of stress in modern life are highlighted in this paper.

**Keywords:** *Ibtilā'*, stress, management, spirituality, cognitive

### Introduction

Stress and stress-related illnesses are the most significant contributor to the current world's worsening mental health level. It is reported that stress is an individualized affair, and it varies between people in term of their resiliencies. Spiritual handling in stressful situation plays a vital role in revitalizing the affected persons. As it is duly known, the main approaches of counselling and psychotherapy since the beginnings have

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been overlooking religion and spirituality as factors influence human psyche. Moreover, it is observed that the focus of the contemporary counselling approaches is changes in emotion, cognitive, behavioural aspects of their clients.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, spirituality and religiosity were considered as unscientific components which cannot be objectively measured and quantified. Yet, due to the failure of some contemporary approaches in handling overly complex problems of human beings or *ibtīlā'* in these modern days, there has been an increasing interest in the role of spirituality and religion in psychotherapy.<sup>2</sup> Historically, our distinguished Muslim scholar and philosopher, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d. 672 AH/ 1273CE) in his *Mathnawī* have provided numerous couplets towards the healing process. Hence, this paper aims to explore al-Rūmī's concepts of *ibtīlā'* and its healing methods, leading to effective stress management. It also discusses al-Rūmī's thought, as embedded in his poems and stories, and his writings on the primacy of the Qur'ān and religious observance in an individual's life. The applicability and advantages of Rūmī's philosophy to an individual's management of stress and mental health in modern life are to be highlighted in this paper. In other words, this paper primarily utilized the qualitative method whereby all information was derived from the literature review. The researchers used approaches mainly, but not limited to historical and textually, comparatively and analytically. The information gathered was collated and pondered over, analysed and presented in a discursive manner and ended with the researchers' perspective.

### **Concept of *ibtīlā'***

The term *balā'* or *ibtīlā'* refers to afflict or challenge or stress or trial or test.<sup>3</sup> The Qur'ān affirms that men will be tested<sup>4</sup> and must be patient so that they can see the opportunity laid down for them and resort their potentiality to excel over those trials and affliction.<sup>5</sup> In other instances, a tremendous psychological test experienced by Prophet Ibrāhīm in the act of sacrificing Ismā'īl is known as "an obvious trial" or *al-balā' al-mubīn*,

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<sup>1</sup> For more clarification see Shane J. Lopez et al., *Positive Psychology The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths*, (London: Sage Publication, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Meguellati Achour et al., "Measuring religiosity and its effects on personal well-being: a case study of Muslim female academicians in Malaysia", *Journal of Religion and Health*, 2015 Jun, No. 54(3), pp. 984-97.

<sup>3</sup> Muḥammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, (Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādr, 1994), vol. 14, 84f.

<sup>4</sup> *Sūrat al-Insān*, 76:2.

<sup>5</sup> *Sūrat al-Mulk*, 67:2.

as explained in *Sūrat al-Ṣaffāt*, verse 106 and the successful ones are described as “gracious trial” or *balā’ ḥasana*, clarified by verse seventeen (17) of *Sūrat al-Anfāl*. In comparison, the horrible torture by Pharaoh on the Israelites is specified as “tremendous trial” or *balā’ ‘aẓīm*, as indicated in verse forty-nine (49) of *Sūrah al-Baqarah*.

A preview on the cited verses indicates the types of trial faced by people of the past and future for *Sūrah al-Baqarah* lucidly specifies in verse 154 that man shall be tested in the form of fear, hunger, loss in goods or lives or the fruits of man’s toil. This element of *ibtīlā’* is further reiterated by *aḥādīth* of the Prophet SAW; some of which that being narrated by Abū Hurayrah: “If God wants to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials”<sup>1</sup> and “No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that pain.”<sup>2</sup> Here it means, reflectively all men do wrong at some point in their lifetimes, and it is by the compassion of Allah, Who expiates their evil deeds. Hence, going through stress and trial is not to be derided because it is Allah’s Mercy. Admittedly today with the pandemic – COVID 19 that devastates in many parts of the world as of January 27 2021, with 2,167,018<sup>3</sup> casualties in the whole world, and Malaysia, 700<sup>4</sup> mortality cases, is yet again another form of *ibtīlā’*, which leads to a high level of stress among people. It is good to refer to Rūmī’s thought, and it’s relevancy from his writings in dealing with this kind of fearful situation or *ibtīlā’*.

### **Rūmī’s thought**

Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī al-Rūmī (d.1273CE/ 671AH) was regarded as the most outstanding Muslim scholars of his time; an authority in Islamic Law, a proficient in the studies of the Qur’ān and ḥadīth of the Prophet SAW, an adept philosopher and an accomplished Ṣūfī master.<sup>5</sup> Most of his influential thought was expressed in poetry,

<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9 vols., (Dimashq: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1981), Volume 7, Book 70, Number 548.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Volume 7, Book 70, Number 545.

<sup>3</sup> “Corona virus COVID 19 Pandemic”. Retrieved January 27, 2020.

<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

<sup>4</sup> “COVID 19, Malaysia”, Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia. Retrieved January 27, 2020. <http://covid-19.moh.gov.my/>

<sup>5</sup> Zarrinkub, Abd al-Husayn, *Step by Step Towards Meeting God: Life and Spiritual Practices of Rumi*, (Tehran: IR Elmi, 1373/1954).

inspirational languages and music known as *samā'*.<sup>1</sup> In terms of his contribution Ali Asghar Halabi<sup>2</sup> believes that Rūmī's thought was presented in his excellent writings namely: *Dīwān al-Shams al-Tabrīzī* (Collected Poems), *Mathnawī* (Couplets), *Fīhi mā fīhi* (Discourses), *Majālis al-Sabah* (The Seven Sessions), and *Makātīb* (Letters). Moreover, out of these writings, *Mathnawī* is considered the most prominent mystical writings in the world<sup>3</sup> that incorporate the concept of *ibtilā'*, which is also the primary concern of the paper.

In order to understand Rūmī's thought on *ibtilā'*, one must look at his view on God and man, primarily mentioned in his *Mathnawī*.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, it is observed that Rūmī held on the fact that the universe, man and other creations are the products of Allah's *Afāl* (Acts) and these *Afāl* are the manifestation of His *Asmā' al-Ḥusnā* (Most Beautiful Names) and *Asmā' al-Ṣifāt* (His Attributes). The issues on Allah's Attributes, Essence and Acts appear to be of great concern among Muslim scholars of the past that invited serious debates<sup>5</sup> despite numerous Qur'ānic called to contemplate the bounties of Allah. As an example, one can refer to *Sūrat al-Rūm*, verses twenty to twenty-four to note the importance of pondering on the splendour of God's creation rather than His Essences. Rūmī, for that matter, has firmly adhered to the concept that all things are created for the purpose of manifestation the One and Only God. He said:

*Know that the world of created beings is like pure and limpid water in which the Attributes of the Almighty are shining.*

*The whole sum of pictured forms is a mere reflection in the water of the river: when you rub your eye, (you will perceive that), all of them are really He.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani, *Mowlana Rumi's Ghazaliat Shams Tabrizi*, (Tehran: IR Sokhan, 1388/1968).

<sup>2</sup> Ali Asghar Halabi, *The Essentials of Mysticism and the Lives of the Muslim Mystics*, (Tehran: IR Asatir, 1385/1965).

<sup>3</sup> Maryam Musharraf, "Sahl Tustari's (d. 283/896), Esoteric Qur'anic Commentary and Rumi's Mathnawi: Part 1", *Maulana Rumi Review*, Vol 5, 2014, pp. 180-203. Retrieved October 7, 2020. <https://www.sciencealert.com/if-you-re-worried-about-children-catching-coronavirus-here-s-what-you-need-to-know>

<sup>4</sup> Jalāl al-dīn al-Rūmī, *Masnavi-i Ma'navi*, tr. Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mathnavi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, (Cambridge, England: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial, 2001), cited as *Mathnavi*.

<sup>5</sup> For more discussion see Al-Bayhaqi, *Allah's Names and Attributes: Islamic Doctrines & Beliefs*, (California: Islamic Supreme Council of America, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> *Mathnavi*, Book VI, pp. 3172-83.



The above poem discussed creations of Allah are pure and genuinely demonstrate His greatness so that the treasure of Divine providences does not remain hidden<sup>1</sup> and that His Attributes and Action may be visible.<sup>2</sup> In terms of man's position, Rūmī clarified that God created man as His *khalīfah* or vicegerent stipulated in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, verse thirty (30) and is grounded on the concept of *alastu*; a pre-existence covenant (*mīthaq*) between man and his Lord as highlighted by verses 172 up to 173 of *Sūrat al-Arāf*. With this responsibility, a man is required to fulfil the *amānah*, a man's acceptor of God's trust, certified by *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*, verse seventy-two (72). Citing *Sūrat al-Ḥadīd*, verse three Rūmī<sup>3</sup> clarified that man is made up of three (3) composites, namely (1) the vicegerent, (2) the covenant and (3) the trust.

Additionally, man is physical (*ẓāhir*) and spiritual (*bāṭin*) being, and that man needs to see things from the perspective of 'form' (*ṣūrat*) and 'meaning' (*ma'nā*) so that he could perceive the wisdom of God in all events in life, and *ibtilā'* for that matter. Simplifying the point, Rūmī affirmed that the ability of a man to fulfil the *amānah* is due to his inherent nature of the free will to choose for the better (*ikhtiyār*) to handle the *ibtilā'* and hence capable of exhibiting the *Asmā' al-Ḥusnā wa al-Ṣifāt* in his life. To give an example, Rūmī described Prophet Ādam as the first model of the human race who became the reflector for *Asmā' al-Ḥusnā wa al-Ṣifāt* by virtue of his spiritual excellence, mentioned in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, verse thirty-seven (37) and his knowledge of Names as stated in the same *Sūrah*, verse thirty-one up to thirty-three (31-33). Furthermore, Prophet Ādam encountered *ibtilā'* but was pardoned and granted the opportunity to amend the miscalculation.<sup>4</sup> For that matter, Rūmī asserted that Prophet Ādam succumbed to the Satanic temptation and ate the prohibited fruit revealed man's ability to choose his path, good or bad. And Prophet Ādam's remorse validated man's realization of free choice.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, this event also affirming the typical example of pride (*kibriyā'*) and envy (*ḥasad*) in the form of the defiance of the Angels including the Satan on Prophet Ādam's creation; Rūmī prompted that man should not harbour the same destructive emotion. He prodded: "...Bandage your Satanic eye for one moment: how long, pray ...."<sup>6</sup> for it

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., Book IV, p. 3028.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Book IV, pp. 1166-68.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Book III, pp. 2300, 2759, 3198; Book IV, p. 521.

<sup>4</sup> See *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2: 35-39.

<sup>5</sup> *Mathnavi*, Book III, pp. 2300, 2759, 3198.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Book III, p. 2300.

has once affected the ability of the Angels including the Satan to realize the great potential hidden in Prophet Ādam's inner nature for they only focus on the latter's outer appearance and on the materials with which he was created from. Hence, lesson learned here is instead of *kibriyā'* and *hasad*, admitting humility (*tawādu'*) of one's vulnerability is the best weapon: "*Our humility is evidence of necessity; our sense of guilt is evidence of free will*".<sup>1</sup> Likewise, being humble and able to suppress the negative feelings of pride and envy are the mobilising agents that Rūmī highlighted for us to go against stress in life and see the wisdom of the *ibtilā'* which befall him.

Pursuing the discussion, Rūmī implored that reckoning the event of *ibtilā'* must be beyond its physical and material needs so that one could realize the true meaning of its essence; "*Man's bodily senses are infirm, but he hath a potent nature within. This body resembles flint and steel, but intrinsically it is a striker of fire*".<sup>2</sup> In other words, knowing the essence would mean the man is fully cognizant that his ultimate trial or anxiety or stress is to strive on the path of spiritual development of fulfilling his responsibilities as God's *khalīfah*.<sup>3</sup> Here we can see Rūmī associated stress with enhancing spirituality.

In striving for spiritual development, Rūmī put forth the methods known as self-knowledge (*ma'rifah al-nafs*); self-purification (*tazkiyyah al-nafs*); and God-awareness (*ma'rifah Allah*). In term of self-knowledge, Rūmī clarified that "*Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations; saying, ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament, hath caused man and woman to moan*"<sup>4</sup> and to explain the real meaning of the cited poem, Zarrinkub believes, that when a man is in the state of *asfal sāfilīn* or lowest among the low, clarified by *Sūrat al-Tīn*, verse five (5); it indicates his existence is without a root and is the slave of the material world, wandering around with no clear direction and suffer from the loss in silent.<sup>5</sup> While "*Everyone who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was united with it. The reed is the comrade of everyone who has been parted from a friend: its strains pierced our hearts*"<sup>6</sup> refers to a man who is in the state of *aḥsan taqwīm* or man is created in the best

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., Book 1, pp. 618-19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Book IV, pp. 3759-60.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Book 1, pp. 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> *Mathnavi*, Book 1, pp. 1-2; 30.

<sup>5</sup> Zarrinkub, Abd al-Husayn, *Sirr Nay: A Critical Analysis and Commentary of Masnavi*, Vol. 1, (Tehran: IR: Ettellat, 1388/1968). Vol.1, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Mathnavi*, Book 1, p. 11.

mould, as stipulated in *Sūrat al-Tīn*, verse four (4) and is experiencing a peaceful and calm condition as he is connected with the Divine Creator. Rūmī further reiterated, a man must be aware of the *ibtīlā'*, and not to be duped nor preoccupied with the glitters of the world but to realize that real enjoyments and happiness lie in the pursuit of his inner nature; his self-knowledge is to know and get closer to his *Rabb*.<sup>1</sup> Hence the practice of self-purification is paramount for it leads to God-awareness. This continuous act of cleansing eventually developed one's character. Discussing man's character in the context of *ibtīlā'* Rūmī believed that one's stance, response, and action will reflect the truth of his characteristics. As an example, a selfish person will satisfy his carnal soul, grumbles and doubts the justice of God in life.

On the contrary, a steadfast person who believes in the overall bounties and beauty of God's creation finds the meaning of the *ibtīlā'* and strives to learn the event's wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Based on *Sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt*, verse two, Rūmī restated: "*Do men think that they will be left alone on saying 'we believe' and that they will not be tested? Hundreds of thousands of snakes claim to be fish. Their forms are the form of fish, but their meanings are the meanings of snakes*"<sup>3</sup> This perceptive statement on "*snake in the form of fish*" alluded to deceitful characteristics which Rūmī attributed to the effect of neglecting one's responsibility as *khalīfah* and readily offering himself:

*"The snake-catcher catches snakes in order to amaze the people – behold the foolishness of the people!*

*Man is a mountain: how should he be led into temptation?*

*How should a mountain become amazed at a snake?*

*Wretched Man does not know himself: he has come from a high estate and fallen into lowlihood.*

*Man has sold himself cheaply: he was satin, he has sewn himself on (become attached) to a tattered cloak.*<sup>4</sup>

The effect of not fulfilling one's responsibility as a *khalīfah* as cited in the poem, rendered man to fall to the temptations of the glitters of the world and to forget his original state of *aḥsan taqwīm* and thus severed his connection with God. Moreover, to overcome this state, Rūmī expressed in a long poem: "*Since from the reed-bed they uprooted me;*

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., Book V, pp. 3340-41.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Book II, pp. 682-86.

<sup>3</sup> Chittick, William C., *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 49, cited as *The Sufi Path of Love*.

<sup>4</sup> *Mathnavi*, Book III, pp. 998-1001.

*My songs expressed each human's agony.... Consumed by burning aches without relief... My deepest secret is in this song I wail....*"<sup>1</sup> At this juncture, the only relief in this world is "singing till we come back" and the term "singing" here is a metaphor of remembrance of God. And as can be seen from many other quotes in *Mathnawī*, remembrance of God in Rūmī's view is all activities and sayings that one does is to please the Almighty God. This act would mean that remembrance of God is one significant relief to our stress in this life. Rūmī extended his thought by expressing that the primary function of a man on earth is not to keep attached to the worldly possession neither be swayed by the pleasure nor be strayed by the pleasures of the world. This idea is seen in *Mathnavi*, reiterating that:

*"Look not at Time's events, which come from the spheres  
and make life so disagreeable!  
Look not at this dearth of daily bread and means of  
livelihood!  
Look not at this famine and fear and trembling!  
Look at this: Despite all the world's bitterness, you are  
passionately and shamelessly attached to it.  
Know that bitter tribulation is a Mercy! Know that the  
empire of Marv and Balkh is a Vengeance!...  
The Cruelty of Time and of every suffering that exists is more  
accessible than the distance from God and heedlessness.  
For that, cruelty will pass, but a distance from Him will not.  
No one possesses good fortune, but he who takes Him a  
familiar spirit."*<sup>2</sup>

This poem represents the fifth tool to relieve our stress in this world by being detached, and this does not mean that we leave the world in total but continue our life struggle but never attach our heart to anything except God.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this point, knowing Rūmī's outlook at evil in this world can be an instrumental insight that will help many to cope with what we see as evils surrounding us in our life. This understanding can be explained better in the words of Chittick, who observed Rūmī's idea of evil:

*From the dimming of goodness as it becomes distant from  
the Source. In the world, things are relatively good and evil,  
not so, since there can be no absolute qualities within  
creation. From another point of view, things are good and*

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., Book I, pp. 1-18.

<sup>2</sup> *Mathnavi*, Book VII, pp.1733-36; 1756-57.

<sup>3</sup> *Sūrat al-Qaṣās*, 28:77.

*evil only concerning us, not with God, for in His eyes, all things are performing but one task: making the Hidden Treasure manifest.*<sup>1</sup>

With the above citation on the relativity of good and evil in man's myopic view and not with God, it provides insight for us to alleviate stress upon seeing evil, which is very cruel at times and has its goodness in the wisdom of God.

To sum up, Rūmī's view on *ibtilā'* as highlighted in the above review, is pertinent in alleviating stress in life. The question that comes to mind, how relevant is Rūmī's thought on *ibtilā'* in today's context of stress management? The discussion will be done in the findings as follows.

### **Rūmī on *ibtilā'* and stress alleviation**

In brief, the above literature review reflects *ibtilā'* or test or anxiety or stress as expressed by Rūmī in poems, extracted from his *Mathnawī*, comprises the following details that mind-set the ways to alleviate stress:

1. *Ibtilā'* are signs of mercy or gift from God – to fulfil the responsibility of a *khalīfah*
2. *Ibtilā'* are part and parcel of human life – to acknowledge it and choose *aḥsān āmal*
3. *Ibtilā'* are to test man's faith – to recall one's root as *aḥsan taqwīm* or deviate as *asfal sāfilīn*
4. *Ibtilā'* offer man freedom of choice – to strive to choose for the better or *ikhtiyār*
5. *Ibtilā'* provide ways to improve oneself – to struggle for *tazkiyyah al-naḥs*
6. *Ibtilā'* bring man closer to his *Rabb* – to reckon the *ẓāhir* and *bāḥin* part of events
7. *Ibtilā'* remind man of the temporary world – to submit to God before leaving this world (*ʿasr*)
8. *Ibtilā'* tell a man not to be swayed by glitters of the world – to strive to detach from worldly possession
9. *Ibtilā'* reveal a man of his real character – to struggle from being “snake in the form of fish.”
10. *Ibtilā'* oblige a man to “return” to his *Rabb* – to practice *ṣabr*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sufi Path of Love*, p. 70.

In practical, the above findings on Rūmī's thought on *ibtilā'* and stress alleviation might help manage our stress, specifically, to deal with the pandemic of Coronavirus popularly known as COVID-19, shown in the following conclusion.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Today, given the pandemic of COVID-19 that impacted the whole world, people are in the state of panic, stress and fear for their life. Moreover, in this time of *ibtilā'*, we are highly encouraged to prepare and strengthen our inner selves by being mindful. Mindfulness is defined as being fully aware of what we are doing, as we do it, without being reactive and judgemental.<sup>1</sup> When we are not reactive, we are more likely to be in the state of calm and allow ourselves to be curious and participate as an observant. When we are not judgemental, we are more likely to be compassionate to ourselves. Indeed, being in the state of calm, we could retrospect that fear of COVID 19 is baseless for it is a reminder that *ibtilā'* are part of life which God has informed and forewarned. When we are stricken, we remember that it is ultimately God Who controls our affair. To alleviate our stress, Rūmī stipulated we should return to Him, Who provides help - *Al-Razzāq* and Who is Knowledgeable - *Al-ʿAlīm* of our affairs. On our part, we should be patient in seeking His help and protection from the *ibtilā'* and in context of COVID-19; as an example of *ikhtiyār* that Malaysians are currently practising, though difficult we should patiently observe the Restriction of Movement Order – RMO, and EMCO – Enhanced Movement Control Order.<sup>2</sup> Not only that we uncomplainingly practice physical

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<sup>1</sup> Russell, Tamara, *What is mindfulness?* (London, UK: Watkins Media Limited, 2017), pp. 5-10.

<sup>2</sup> "Social activities barred during MCO to reduce COVID-19 transmission – PM Muhyiddin", BERNAMA, January 11, 2021. Retrieved January 27, 2021. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2021/01/social-activities-barred-during-mco-to-reduce-covid-19-transmission-pm-muhyiddin/?highlight=mco> Adib Povera, "Government mulling stricter MCO", *News Straits Times*, October 19, 2020. Retrieved January 27, 2021. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/10/633587/government-mulling-stricter-mco> In the news the Senior Defence Minister of Malaysia says that "...it is easier for us to implement the Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO) that will result in the restriction of movements and subsequently mitigate the risk of Covid-19 transmission within the community." However, to caution the public, Dr Dzulkefly, the Head of COVID 19, Selangor Taskforce: "I need to stress that lockdowns of Movement control Order (MCO) do not end the pandemic. We do not exit a pandemic with lockdowns. It can only be achieved through the arrival and use of a vaccine or an antiviral agent

distancing, but we also unwearingly control ourselves from the stockpile that might affect other consumers. At the same time, we should continuously strive to protect ourselves by hand sanitising, self-isolating at home and mask-wearing. With these acts of patient and effort put forth, the protection will come about by Allah's *Af'āl*.

Contemplating the nature of COVID-19 brings us to the realization that illnesses, plaque and viruses are not something new. Physically (*ẓāhir*) COVID-19 is a new strain of virus but intrinsically (*ma'nā*) in terms of its impact on life is not new. The Qur'ān revealed the illness and suffering of Prophets like Prophet Ayyūb, as mentioned by verses 83-84 of *Sūrat Al-Anbiyā'*, and how he courageously battled against *ibtilā'* as a reminder to lessen our stressful state of mind. This contemplative aptitude on *ibtilā'* may lead us to realize that He, the Only Healer - *Al-Shāfi'*, Who can heal people from the illness due to COVID-19. Like Prophet Ayyūb's illness, we are threatened by a microscopic virus with no immediate vaccine to shield us. Albeit Pfizer, Merck, Moderna, Sputnik light, and Sinovac claim to have the COVID-19 treatment vaccine,<sup>1</sup> the certainty is far-fetch. The reason is that vaccines require years of continuous research and testing before being approved, accepted and verified by the health check authority. With this verification, the vaccine can be distributed to the clinic for public consumption. However, in 2020, scientists quickly embarked on a race to generate the so-called safe and effective coronavirus in record time.<sup>2</sup> It is reported that "Researchers are currently testing sixty-six (66) vaccines in clinical trials on humans, and twenty (20) have reached the final testing stages. At least ninety (90) preclinical vaccines are under active investigation in animals".<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, a small anopheles' mosquito could bring down many people, and the World Health Organization (WHO) reported 405000 casualties in 2018.<sup>4</sup> All of these thoughts drive us to recall our roots – *aḥsan taqwīm* and

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against the disease of coronavirus infectious disease 2019 or Covid-19." See Kanmani Batumalai, "Lockdown Will not End Covid-19 Spread: Experts", *Code Blue*, October 26, 2020. Retrieved January 27, 2021.

<https://codeblue.galencentre.org/2020/10/26/lockdown-wont-end-covid-19-spread-experts/>

<sup>1</sup> Carl Zimmer, Jonathan Corum and Sui-Lee Wee, "Coronavirus Vaccine Tracker", *New York Times*, January 26, 2021. Retrieved January 27 2021,

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/science/coronavirus-vaccine-tracker.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization, "Malaria". Retrieved January 27, 2021,

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/malaria>

that all of us are to return to our *Al-Shāfi'* and that we need to purify our soul free from succumbing to the satanic temptation. We should know that *ibtilā'* of this kind could remind us to fulfil our role as a *khalīfah*, a trust – *mīthaq*, that we as an individual soul in yonder years have affirmed – *alastu*, the affirmation of Oneness of God. As a *khalīfah*, we must “bandage our satanic eye” through *ṣalāt* and other forms of *ibādah*<sup>1</sup> so that we could free our panic state of mind from the threat of COVID-19 but to only have fear in the One and Only God.

On the other hand, being mindful of COVID-19's threat does not mean we are forsaking our *khalīfah* role, but we are reinforcing our duty to be a cautious and practising balance between two extremes. Additionally, besides needing to fulfil our physical and physiological needs for our survival, we must not forsake our spiritual development; without which our mental health would be severely impaired. Rūmī's idea of balance is an excellent reminder for us not to be preoccupied with excessive material gain. This tendency leads to specific characteristics of obsessed with the pursuance of bodily, material gratifications. The Qur'ān have elaborated with specific details on many of these tendencies as characteristic of *al-Insān* who tends to indulge in behaviours such as accumulating of worldly possessions, holding tight to the material amenities he accumulates, getting highly frustrated if he loses some of his wealth and becoming overly vain when he has abundant of wealth.<sup>2</sup>

In a nutshell Rūmī's thought on *ibtilā'* is useful to alleviate stress in life and to use the following Qur'ānic verses, he has beautifully reminded us not to behave like a *snake in the form of fish* but instead be aware of our weakness for improvement.

“Truly man was created very impatient (19) Fretful when evil touches him (20) And niggardly when good reaches him (21) Not so those devoted to Prayer (22) Those who remain steadfast to their prayer (23) And those in whose wealth is a recognized right (24) For the (needy) who asks and him who is prevented (for some reason from asking)(25) And those who hold to the truth of the Day of Judgment (26) And those who fear the displeasure of their Lord (27)”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2: 177.

<sup>2</sup> Ragab, Ibrahim, “Dealing with Psychosocial Problems: Islamic Perspectives”. Paper submitted to the Second Integration Workshop, 1997, IIUM.

<sup>3</sup> *Sūrat al-Ma'ārij*, 70:19-27.



The above Qur'ānic verses stressed the inclination of us to be impatient, greedy, restless, stingy and worried when faced with many issues and concerns in the material world. However, to be mentally and spiritually at peace, we need to fulfil and answer the spiritual calling and needs. We need to pray to Allah consistently and be *khushū'* in our prayers. We need to continue to acquire knowledge on how to achieve good quality *ṣalāt*. We also need to be helpful to others through *infāq* to the needy. The verses are indeed a reminder of the importance of fulfilling the spiritual needs and answering the spiritual call to attain spiritual peace and free from Satan's temptation. For that viewpoint, Malik Badri remarked:

*"An enriched Heart with īmān and Allah's consciousness can easily detect the evil thought that passes through it, confines it, and diffuses its effects, just as a sound immune system in the body detects the intrusion of germs and antigens, besieges it, and destroys it with specialised antibodies."*<sup>1</sup>

This view is in line with the Qur'ānic verse: *"Those who fear God when an evil thought from Satan assaults them, bring Allah to mind, and lo! They see clearly."*<sup>2</sup> It typifies *īmān* in projecting life in the hereafter. For *īmān* will rationalise and neutralise all the incoming negative and irrational thoughts, especially when tested with life difficulties, like COVID-19. We must be ready to face a threat for it is a testing ground of our *īmān* to a different level. If we fail, we know that God is there ever Merciful to allow us to re-sit our examination.

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<sup>1</sup> Badri, Malik, *Contemplation: An Islamic psycho-spiritual study*, (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Medina Books, 2000), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Sūrat al-A 'rāf*, 7:201.

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# AL-ITQĀN

JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC SCIENCES AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

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**Volume: 5**

**Issue No. 1**

**February 2021**

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