

Harmful Habits and Healthy Living

Aleem Karmali reflects on the importance of making the right choices in our everyday lives and living the ethics of Islam

Islamic Ethics and Healthy Living

In Islam, faith (*din*) and world (*duniya*) are inseparable. Therefore, faith is not only a matter of being regular in prayer and other acts of worship, but is also fundamentally connected to one's ethical interactions with others, the world, and towards the self. Ethics are about the choices we make every day and how we decide what the right thing to do is.

With regards to healthy living, this means making wise decisions in caring for the body, mind and spirit, such as choices relating to exercise, eating healthy, finding a balance between work and life, making time for family and friends, intellectual stimulation through learning and reading, engaging in creative expression, and devoting time to acts of prayer and meditation.

Many of these decisions affect both the individual and others, such as family, friends, colleagues, and the broader society. As Ismailis, these decisions may also bear on one's spiritual relationships with God and the Imam.

Unhealthy Habits: Alcohol, Drugs and Smoking

In discussing the ethics of healthy living, Mawlana Hazar Imam has consistently warned the Jamat to avoid engaging in activities that cause harm to the self and to others, such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, and smoking. These activities are harmful to the body, mind and soul of an individual, involve an unnecessary waste of money, and can be damaging to family and community.

The Qur'an addresses harmful behaviours, in *Sura 2, Ayat 219*, which says, 'They ask you [O Prophet] about intoxicants and gambling. Say: there is great sin in both, although they have some benefit for people: but their harm is greater than their benefit'.

In reflecting on this verse, we know that drugs and

alcohol can have certain benefits. For example, they can be used for medicinal purposes, but there is also ample scientific evidence to show that medications can be harmful and addictive when misused. Therefore, this suggests that they should be avoided whenever possible, or used only for specific purposes and with great care.

Harm to the Body

There may appear to be many short-term benefits to alcohol, drugs and smoking, such as feelings of relaxation and happiness, or fitting in socially, but there are a number of reasons for avoiding them.

According to the NHS website, alcohol, drugs and tobacco (including cigarettes, *paan* and shisha) can all be highly addictive and cause significant long-term health problems. They are linked to a number of medical conditions including heart disease, high blood pressure, strokes, various types of cancer, reproduction and fertility problems, liver disease, lung diseases, skin problems, and weight gain.

Harm to the Community

The negative impacts are not limited to the self, as our actions have a bearing on those around us. Actions such as driving while intoxicated can cause injury or death that may reverberate through many families and communities. Substance abuse can also have an impact on family and community through damaged relationships, verbal abuse, domestic violence, wasting financial resources, an inability to provide for one's family, and a loss of dignity and honour. Treatment for related diseases also becomes an economic burden on society.

Harm to the Intellect

For Muslims, the intellect is considered to be God's greatest gift to humankind and should be protected and nurtured, not damaged or destroyed. The mind is essential to the ability to make sound ethical decisions, which we earlier explained are an important part of the Islamic 'way of life'.

According to the NHS, substance abuse is linked to a number of short and long-term mental impacts, including loss of judgment leading to poor decisions, depression, paranoia, anxiety, confusion, insomnia, and schizophrenia.

The AKDN's Ethical Framework includes the Ethic of Sound Mind, stating that, 'Any substance abuse which interferes with the normal functioning of the mind is a greater violation of the ethical code for it amounts to self-inflicted loss of personal dignity and of the ability to fulfil one's responsibility to oneself, to one's family and to society'.

Spiritual Harm

The harm of the intellect also has spiritual implications for religious believers. The Qur'an continuously stresses the remembrance of God and the ideal for many Muslims is to be in a state of *taqwa*, or God-consciousness, in which one remembers the Divine constantly.

The Qur'an warns, 'Satan only wishes to create enmity and hatred among you through intoxicants and gambling, and to keep you away from the remembrance of God and prayer. Will you therefore not desist?' (5:91).

From this verse, we find that these harmful social habits also have a spiritual impact in that they prevent the remembrance of God and prayer, in addition to inhibiting the ability to make rational ethical decisions. If worship and ethical action are the bedrocks of the Islamic faith, then this means that substance abuse undermines the most fundamental principles of Islam.

'The greatest danger'

It is for the many reasons above that our 48th Imam, Mawlana Sultan Mahomed Shah, said the following in a speech to the Transvaal Muslim League in Johannesburg, South Africa on August 12, 1945:

'The greatest danger to every Muslim citizen – I have not the least hesitation in saying it – is alcohol. Time has shown that it is an injury to you; an injury to your person; an injury to your health. It is forbidden because it carries greater evil than good. Believe me, in a community like yours, alcohol is a very grave danger. Once you got into the alcohol habit, I do not know where it would lead you. A handful, here and there, of the weak, or of the unhappy, find their way to this terrible poison. Avoid it at all costs'.

Making Wise Choices

The Qur'anic verse above (5:91) ends by posing a question to the believer: 'Will you therefore not desist?' This question speaks to the use of the intellect in relation to guidance.

Shi'a Ismaili Muslims are advised by the Imam to make wise ethical decisions that are informed by the guidance of faith. While this guidance is made available, it is for each individual to put it into practice in their lives.

Seeking Forgiveness

To conclude, it is important to mention the notions of repentance and forgiveness in Islam, as some may feel concerned about the impact of their past behaviour.

While the faith encourages believers to follow 'the straight path', there is an understanding that humans are imperfect and prone to error. Through sincere intention, repentance, and an attempt at changing one's behaviour, the Qur'an is clear that believers can seek forgiveness for their mistakes: 'It may well be that God will pardon them. God is Ever-Pardoning, Ever-Forgiving' (4:99).