CONTENTMENT (QANĀʾAH) AND ITS ROLE IN CURBING SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

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Abstract: Contentment is an important dimension of virtuous human character (akhlāq) in the context of our attitude towards material provision and worldly sustenance, and our attitude towards sharing our sustenance with others. We first explore the position which the discipline of cultivating human character holds in Islam. It discloses the direct relationship of human character with our society and the environment. These relations are the foundation on which the treatment of contentment (qanaʿah) is based. After defining the term qanaʿah, we discuss the “good wholesome life (hayatan tayyibah)” mentioned in the Qurʾan (al-Nahl 16:97) which denotes ‘self-contentment’. The term provides the premise that a virtuous and pure life in this world is based on human self-control towards his means of provision, his society, and the environment. With a disciplined human attitude towards material means, material abundance or scarcity of worldly things will not disrupt one’s conviction and self-sufficiency. We then discuss the by-products of non-contentment and greed such as wasting of food and other natural resources. This leads us to the topic of self-discipline in terms of dealing with the material world and our fellows. Finally we discuss the importance of self-discipline through frugal-moderation for individual and civilisational renewal.

Human Character and its Position in Islam

In Islam, akhlāq, (ethics) (singular khuluq) or the cultivation of virtuous character-traits, is conceived as the principles which govern human conduct and behaviour determined by revelation (Qurʾan and Sunna). These character-traits are principles which discipline and rectify human existence in order to achieve the purpose of human life in this world to the fullest. This conception of human behaviour brings home the point that morality is a system of conduct leading to the good life. It is a model of behaviour and practical knowledge to deal with others redundant. The ‘others’ here can be living beings whether fellow people and animals or inorganic things including our environment, property, wealth, etc. What one should stress here is that the moral order is not merely a subsidiary portion of Islam, rather it is the essence of Islam which is all-pervading in every aspect of life. It may be said by and large that the axis of the Islamic order is its moral praxis and philosophy. The Prophet (saww) stated: “Indeed I was sent to perfect the noble character-traits”.1 In his famous hadith the Prophet (saww) confined his mission to perfect or to complete the virtuous qualities of humans. He was sent to complete the ethical guidance which previous Prophets had initiated. Hence, the objective of the Prophets and their guidance sent by Almighty Allah

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was the moral perfection of humans.

The Prophet’s utterance sheds light on the deep relationship between Islam and morality. This relationship is seen in many statements of the Prophet Muhammad including: “Religion is good character” which defined Religion as ‘good character (husn al-khuluq)’. This relationship between religion and morality was clear to the Companions of the Prophet. When the mother of believers ʿĀ’ishah was asked about the character of the Prophet, she answered: “His character was the Qur’an (kāna khulquhu al-qur’ān)”. This is further supported by the statement related from the Prophet himself: “Obscenity and obscene actions do not pertain to Islam in anything, and the best people in terms of Islam are best in terms of character”. In another occasion he is reported to have said: “Islam is [all about] good character”.

The nature of the relationship is such that both Islam and good character are inseparable. Weakness in one will project weakness on the other and vice-versa. The relationship between the two does not end here. It is reflected at the literary level where the word character (khulq) and the word dīn (faith-practice) complement each other as synonyms. The word dīn denotes the duties one has towards Almighty Allah, towards oneself, towards others, and one’s duties towards other living creatures. On the other hand, the word akhlāq similarly denotes these duties as we pointed out above.

We emphasise that morality is not merely a portion of Islam, but is the essence of Islam, which pervades every aspect of Islam like faith (īmān) itself. The cord between faith and morality is reflected in the hadith: “the most perfect of believers in faith are the ones who have more superior character-traits”. The perfection of faith here is attached to the perfection of character. The relationship between faith and character is evidenced in other reports: “One is not faithful unless he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” Similarly the narrated hadith: “he who believes in Allah and the Last day will not hurt his neighbour, he who believes in Allah and the Last day should entertain his guest, and he who believes in Allah and the Last day should say good words or should remain silent.” Consideration of one’s faith here is made dependent on good attitude towards neighbours and on speech which does not harm people’s feelings.

Likewise, morality is deeply embedded in the ritual worship (ʿibādah) prescribed by Islam. In essence the spirit of worship is profoundly ethical, for worship is fulfilment of the duties one has towards Almighty Allah. The ethical concern prevails in all acts of worship. For example regarding prayers (salāh) Almighty Allah says (al-ʿAnkabūt 29: 45): “And establish regular prayer: for prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds.” In regard to fasting the Prophet explained that one who does not behave morally, Almighty Allah will not accept his fast. Abu Hurayrah reported the Prophet as saying: “Whoever does...
not give up forged speech and evil actions, Allah is not in need of his abstaining from his food and drink.” Similarly in relation to pilgrimage (Hajj) Almighty Allah prohibits obscenity (rafath), wickedness (fusūq), and wrangling (jidāl) for one performing pilgrimage (al-Baqarah 2:197). In this manner morality is always imbedded in acts of worships prescribed by Islam. As the worshipper executes his duties towards his Creator, his heart thereby becomes prone towards fulfilling the rights of other humans and creatures.

Furthermore, the ethical concern is also seen in Islamic legal teachings pertaining to all types of transactions amongst humans (al-muʿāmalat al-‘āmmah). The objectives of these Islamic teachings or Shariah rulings are summarised and classified into five: preservation of religion, life, lineage, property, and faculty of reason. These five Shariah objectives (maqāsid) reflect the essence of morality. There are various traditions which support this. The Prophet ﷺ said; “The Muslim is one from whose hands and tongue other Muslims are safe”; and “The one who deceives is not from us”; and “he who raises weapons against us is not from us.” The ethical thrust projected by these hadiths relate to people’s dealings with each other. They are taught not to cause harm or damage to each other, which is the aim which the five Shariah objectives strive to realise. Therefore, it can be said that the Shariah objectives (maqāsid al-shari‘ah) are actually ethical objectives (maqāsid akhlāqiyyah).10 To summarise our discussion on the role morality plays in Islam, it will be appropriate to state that moral perfection is the spirit of the Islamic message while the Shariah system is the outer garb of this spirit.

The reason behind the overriding interest of Islam in ethical behaviour is that this is very important for continuity of social life and its physical and spiritual progress. One who considers the scope of ethical principles and extends their necessity to embrace human existence, will not dispute this truth. Imagine what the life of a society would be like, if moral principles are omitted allowing the dominance of corruption, decadence, lying, cheating, theft, bloodshed, and infringement of prohibitions and rights? What will life be like if the deeper meaning of human relations including love, affection, integrity, cooperation, compassion, and sincerity is eliminated? Could harmonious social life continue in this situation?11 Undoubtedly such life would be miserable and resemble the law of the jungle. This is because deep in their nature humans are altruistic and societal while at the same time they have inclinations towards dominating, arrogance, selfishness, or revenge. If they use these self-centred powers (al-quwā) in corrupt ways then they will encourage disaster. Almighty Allah says (al-Baqarah 2:205): “when he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread corruption through the earth and destroy crops and cattle. But Allah loveth not corruption.” In order to avoid corruption, human beings are in need of an ethical order (niẓām khulqī) which will cater for their social needs, and block their evil
inclinations and instincts, while guiding them to use their powers in ways which will benefit them and others.

In line with this ethical order, Islam strictly prohibits killing (except for certain specific reasons) even killing one’s self since killing infringes on life. Killing even one human is considered to transgress on the life of all mankind. The Qur’an says (al-Ma’idah 5:32): “if any one slew a person–unless it be for murder or for spreading corruption in the land–it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.” In the same way, not only killing itself is prohibited, but those things which lead to killing as well. These measures are meant to protect and enhance life. In communal life, humans can only flourish if their social relations are upright and peaceful, and are based on the principle of brotherhood (al-ikhā’) and sincerity (al-ikhlaṣ). There are many hadith of the Prophet which support this principle, as Imam al-Tirmidhi narrated: “A Muslim is brother to a Muslim, he will not cheat him, he will not lie to him, he will not forsake him, for the blood, property, and dignity of every Muslim is unlawful to another. It is enough for a Muslim to be evil merely by despising his Muslim brother.” The principle of brotherhood is actually the end result, for it can only come into existence if one instils within oneself good character-traits and eliminates the blameworthy traits.

Qanā’ah

The human attitude towards their sustenance, wasting because of non-contentment, and human attitude towards sharing one’s livelihood with others, are at the heart of the Islamic concept of qanā’ah, and the Qur’anic concept of ‘a good wholesome life (hayāt tayyibah)’. The Arabic root verb qana’a means to embrace something with open hands or approach it face to face (al-iqbal bi-l-wajh ‘ala l-shay’). The noun qanā’ah denotes the condition where one is satisfied with something, and has sufficiency for one’s needs. The root meaning—embracing with open hands—is connected with contentment or satisfaction. One only embraces something with open hands when one is satisfied with that thing as sufficient for one’s needs. This literal meaning is the bridge which opens out to the technical ethical and spiritual meaning. Specifically qanā’ah connotes satisfaction of self (nafs) with the distribution of means (al-raḍa bi al-qism). This actually involves a double movement of acceptance and relinquishing. The leading Sufi master of Khurasān, al-Qushayri (d. 1072 CE) observed that qanā’ah is to be content with what one has and to abandon greed (hirṣ) for what one does not have. The famous literary thinker al-Jāḥīḍ presented a broader definition: Qanā’ah is to limit oneself to what life offers; satisfaction with things which make livelihood easy; to abandon greed for acquiring material goods; to abandon the urge for seeking high status and affection for it; and abandoning...
inclination towards material goods and the compulsion to amass them. In both definitions greed is pointed to as a condition which contradicts contentment. In order to be content, satisfaction with what one has is not enough, but one has to take a further step by relinquishing greed for acquiring what one does not have. Greed takes different forms including urges, fondness, or self-inclination, and when greed reaches its utmost height it manifests in the form of compulsion and violence in pursuit of what one desires to acquire.

a) A Good Wholesome Life (Ḥayātan Ṭayyibah)

Contentment may be understood as a wealth which never depletes. Acquiring such a form of inner-wealth can overcome troubles and problems such as lasting desires, over-consumption, and depletion of natural resources. It can transform selfish, non-caring and greedy persons into caring and generous ones. Islamic teachings make this very clear. The revered ethical writer Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (d. 965 CE) in his Rawḍat al-ʻUqalā’ stated that the phrase mentioned in the Qur’an “ḥayātan ṭayyibah” refers to contentment (al-qanā’ah). This verse states (al-Naḥl 16:97): “Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily, We will certainly enliven him with a good-wholesome life…” The 19th century Iraqi scholar, Shihāb al-Dīn Sayyid Maḥmūd Al-Alīsī (d. 1853) reported that the Prophet ﷺ taught that the correct interpretation of this phrase “a good-wholesome life” is ‘contentment’, and the new life mentioned in the verse refers to our life in this world. Our material life here and now can only be pleasing and wholesome if it is lived with contentment (aysh al-qiṣn). A life driven by greed will devolve into never ending toil and distress.

The leading exegete of the Qur’an Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) besides ‘al-qanā’ah’, presented several interpretations of the phrase “good-wholesome life” including lawful provision (al-rizq al-ḥalāl), good provision (al-rizq al-ḥasan), wholesome provision (al-rizq al-ṭayyib), happiness (al-sa’ādah), and others. Amongst all these interpretations Ibn Jarīr gave clear preference to ‘al-qanā’ah’. His explanation throws important light on the significance of a good-wholesome life:

This is because all other interpretations are probable to be in harmony with the meaning of qanā’ah. Almighty Allah will make the pious people content with whatever lawful or good or wholesome provision they are provided. It is not necessary that the provision provided to pious people be in abundance. Most of the pious people are provided with limited material provisions in any case. The important point here is not the amount of the provision, but the human behaviour in relation to the worldly materials. With contentment as a praiseworthy character- trait, pious people are grateful and happy with whatever lawful means provided to them.
Contentment is more important than the material itself. This is the reason why the most outstanding model of contentment, the Prophet (ﷺ) used to supplicate: “O Allah! Make me content with whatever you have provided me, bless it for me, and for all that I do not have recompense me with goodness.”

b) Willing Acceptance (Riḍā)

Another term very similar to qanā’ah is riḍā (acceptance or compliance). The word riḍā most often denotes the acceptance of fate and Divine decree of Almighty Allah (al-qadā wa al-qadr). This acceptance requires people to be tolerant and compliant with whatever circumstances they confront, whether it is comfortable or distressful. So riḍā in this sense shares something with qanā’ah. However to Iraqi Sufis, since riḍā is one of the ‘states’ (al-ahwāl, pl. of ḥāl) which alights in the heart and is not attained by the efforts made by servants of Allah, it may be considered as the end product of qanā’ah. In other words, people who exert effort in being grateful with what they have and do not surrender to greed, are the ones in whom riḍā alights in their hearts. This can be said regarding qanā’ah as well. It is a station (maqām) as far as the servants of Allah are making an effort to be economical in their habits of consumption. After hard effort to maintain frugal habits, they are rewarded with qanā’ah as a ‘state’ within their hearts. This is evidenced in the Prophet’s utterance: “He who seeks to achieve a state of sufficiency, Almighty Allah will render him free of need, and he who strives to be content, Allah will make him content (man yastaghni yughnihu Allāh wa man yaqna‘ yuqanni‘hu Allāh)”.

If we consider qanā’ah as a state, then obviously it has to come as an end-result of efforts known as exercises (riyāḍah). Some scholars refer to such efforts as a cure (‘ilāj), like the great Hanbali scholar, Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī (d. 1223 CE), who wrote that by curing greed and avid-desire (tama’), one could achieve qanā’ah. He added that the servant also needs to economize the resources of his livelihood (al-iqtiṣād fi al-ma‘īshah). One who intends to achieve qanā’ah should initiate an effort to control his consuming habits, limit his desires to necessities, cut indulgence in luxuries, and mentally prepare his self. Therefore, we conclude that all these discussions on qanā’ah definitely support the reality that it is an umbrella concept which embraces various related concepts such as zuhd (renunciation), faqr (voluntary poverty), infāq (spending on others), and opposes isrāf (extravagance), tabdhīr (wasting), greed, and others. To explore fully all these dimensions of the key concept of ‘contentment’ would take us far beyond the limits of our present study.

To better understand how contentment can lead to a good-wholesome life, we may approach it from two complementary perspectives: One being the human attitude towards the means provided for him, and the other from the perspective of human behaviour in sharing their means with others.
Human Behaviour towards Sustenance

The first perspective is supported by Sa’id Nursi’s (d. 1960 CE) allegory of two men entering a hall with an audience hosted by a man of honour during a severe winter. The one embodied with the trait of contentment is satisfied with the place he is provided by the host so long as he is safe from the cold outside while the one inflated by the trait of greed shows anger and dissatisfaction for not getting the most honoured seat by respecting his ego which he feels he deserves. Both these men show gratitude differently to the host. The host’s treatment towards both of them is according to their attitude as well. Looking at the demanding non-appreciative attitude, the host offered him a place at the end of the hall, while he offered the more respected place to the one who showed gratitude and humility. Sa’id Nursi then elaborates that the “hall” stands for the universe and the resources in it, while the host portrays Almighty Allah, and the two men represent types of humans utilizing the universe with different attitudes.23

In this allegory Said Nursi explains that a man who is greedy will not appreciate the means he already has. He will think that what he has is not enough for him, so he will complain and never show gratitude. We have pointed earlier to the word “satisfaction” in the definition of qanā’ah which is an important element in understanding contentment. Greed leads to non-contentment (‘adam al-qanā’ah) and non-contentment is dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction disseminates complaints inside the greedy person, instead of appreciation and gratitude (shukr). It destroys his enthusiasm to work and to make an effort so he becomes lazy. Laziness is tantamount to desire for wealth, which does not involve making effort even if it is unlawful. In this way the greedy person loses his self-respect and esteem.24

Said Nursi goes on to demonstrate that the negative effect of greediness and non-contentment can even be experienced in such everyday activities as sleeping and waiting for someone. If one allows oneself to sleep naturally he will doze off smoothly. On the other hand when one forces oneself to sleep, he will be turning on his sides impatiently and will end up losing the mood to sleep altogether. Similarly when waiting for someone for an important purpose, if one keeps on complaining “where is the person?” “why is he late?” he will end up losing patience. Eventually he will get up and leave without achieving the important purpose. The hidden reason behind humans behaving greedily in doing their everyday work is that there is an arrangement and order decreed by Divine Wisdom in everything. In order to produce bread, one has to cultivate, harvest, mill, then bake. A greedy person in an effort to achieve a fast result tries either to jump this order and fails to achieve his goal, or he tries to omit one of the steps and may achieve his goal but with defects.25
Waste: The Byproduct of Non-Contentment

Almighty Allah prohibited wasting (al-A’rāf 7:31): “Eat and drink: but waste not by excess, for Allah loveth not the wasters.” Nursi (in his al-Lam’ah no. 19) while explaining this verse relates it to moderation (iqtiṣād)—in other words the economical usage of sustenance. He advised that to use one’s sustenance with frugality is the shukr ma’nawi (the inner appreciation) because of which Almighty Allah will bestow blessings (barakah) on the person. To support this, he presented the Prophet’s utterance: “He who is thrifty will not lament regarding his family livelihood”. People go into poverty or scarcity when they are not moderate in their expenditure. An interesting point emerges here: that when people start wasting and are not thrifty, they activate greed in themselves. We earlier pointed out that greed will lead to non-contentment. It is a vicious cycle: Wasting leads to greed, greed leads to non-contentment, and non-contentment leads to wasting once again. We will explore this cycle in our discussion below.

![Figure 1: Vicious Cycle of Wasting](Source: Author)

If greed and non-contentment from the individual’s attitude becomes the attitude of an entire society or nation, then similar consequences as explained above shall befall them. As an example, Nursi points towards the attitude of Jews and their greed for worldly possessions. Their march to own more and more made them subject to humiliation, misery, death and insult. Their greed led them to gain wealth using usury, trickery, and sophisticated means of deception. Yet they were not satisfied with such means and a never ending effort for a never ending desire brought them humiliation. Nursi contrasted them with those nomads who in their contentment live a dignified life with little material possessions. The point here is that it is not the amount of sustenance, but one’s attitude towards it. Jews and Nomads are only mentioned as examples of human attitudes although
greed and non-contentment are not limited to any group or nation. This is an attitude which has now become a global phenomenon. Non-contentment puts individuals and organisations into fear. This fear takes the form of sky rocketing demands which are one of the key factors driving the prodigious production of goods in contemporary economies. The demand is not necessarily authentic, but similar to false alarms triggered in the state of fear. To understand the authenticity level of the demand, one should consider the consumer attitudes in the market and the amount of resource-wastage. The UK-based Institution of Mechanical Engineers reported that in “mature fully developed” countries like the UK, wastage often results from poor retail and consumer behaviour. The institution reported that “between 30% and 50% of what was bought in developed countries is thrown away by the purchaser”. Wasting of sustenance is not only a matter of losing “life-supporting nutrition” in the case of food, but also means wasting priceless resources “including land, water and energy.”

The contemporary global “wasting attitude” is better understood when contrasted with rubbish. Where does the rubbish come from? Who produces rubbish and why? In 2012, the New Straits Times published a report with the title “World’s rubbish problem piling up”. The report quoted the World Bank that city and urban dwellers are the major rubbish producers: they generated more than 1.3 billion tonnes of rubbish a year, and would generate 2.2 billion tonnes by the year 2025. One of the concerns of the World Bank was the cost of managing the waste. “The old concept of “throwing away” rubbish no longer works.” The cost to manage solid waste in 2012 was US$205 and will soar to US$375 billion (RM 1.1 trillion) in one's year time. Besides addressing the waste management cost which is obviously another financial burden on the world, this issue of our widespread wasting attitude has to be addressed. The origin of the rubbish problem is human attitude. Non-contentment and greed has blindfolded us to make well-thought decisions in regard to what we need, how much we should buy or consume, and what is healthy and what is not.

The campaign “Think, Eat, Save and Reduce Your Foodprint” made by World Environmental Day 2013, showed some positive changes in both consumers and restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. While Malaysia was marking the World Environment Day, Kuala Lumpur alone that year threw about 15,000 tonnes of food and kitchen waste on a daily basis. That was enough to fill 7.5 football fields or feed 7.5 million people a day. 10% to 15% of this waste was “unconsumed and expired food.” Due to the campaign, hoteliers reported decline in the number of people wasting food at buffets. People opted to reduce the courses in Ten-course Chinese diners which had a record of throwing away 30% of food. The Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) reported an increase in the number of cleared plates by diners. Hotels now prepare food according to the number of
reservations. These positive changes are related to increased awareness. Thus, an ethical and religious approach may play an effective role in changing peoples’ greedy and non-contented attitudes.

One can understand from these few examples that humans are not capable of utilising all the sustenance obtained by the demands of their non-contented and wasteful attitudes. Their capacity to utilise is limited. Beyond their capacity, they will have to discard part of the sustenance or keep the sustenance until a true need arises again. Sustenance which cannot be kept because of its perishable nature will be wasted. For instance, a non-contented hungry man buys three pieces of cooked chicken. His stomach has the capacity for only two pieces. After eating two pieces the third piece is most likely to be thrown in the bin a common scenario one sees in restaurants. On the other hand, a contented man will buy according to his capacity and needs, he will not waste. He will be thrifty in utilising his sustenance.

Similarly, abundant sustenance cannot quench the thirst of greed. The greed will keep on triggering false demands. The Prophet’s companion Sa’d b. Abi Waqas spoke well when he said to his son: “O Son if you seek for riches, seek it through contentment. He who does not have contentment, wealth will never suffice him”.

Our discussion regarding human attitude towards sustenance indicates that contentment can teach humans to appreciate what they have. They can be thrifty when utilising their provisions and avoid wasting. We also saw that with non-contentment humans don’t appreciate the means; and they tend to be unhappy and demanding. They waste resources when they accumulate them because of false demands or beyond wise and balanced need.

Human Attitude towards Sharing One’s Livelihood with Others

After viewing some negative effects of non-contentment and greed on individuals and societies at large, we now concentrate on explaining qanā’ah in relation to sharing sustenance with others. Some humans due to greed become selfish and neglect to pay their zakah (charitable tax) to the needy. This can be applied to other forms of beneficence, such as establishing waqf-based institutions to assist the poor, orphans, widows, single mothers, and others. As we saw above, contentment is not only related to material means, but also plays an important role in everyday inter-human activities. Sparing time for family and friends is not possible if one is not content with oneself, for greed and non-contentment are inherent qualities of self-centeredness. Issues such as impatience, anger, or selfishness, are all connected with non-contentment. To this extent, one may assert that greed and non-contentment serve as a source of immorality and the decay of human social life.
Based on this insight, two common attitudes are born in society which are quite relevant to our present time:

1. Once my stomach is full, I do not have to care about others dying in hunger.
2. You work and I will eat. You make an effort and I will rest.\(^{34}\)

Both attitudes reflect that without contentment humans become self-centred and stingy (bakhil). When humans become self-centred and do not fulfil the virtue of sharing their material means with other humans, they actually harm their “finer nature”. The Holy Qur’an states (Muhammad 47: 38): “Behold, you are those invited to spend (of your substance) in the Way of Allah: but among you are some who are niggardly. But any who are niggardly are so at the expense of their own souls…” The verse points to the message that humans are invited to participate in the cause of Almighty Allah (jî sabîl Allâh), namely by sharing with others. Almighty Allah is independent of human aid in His cause. The invitation to serve the cause of Almighty Allah is for one’s own ultimate good. If one does not take part in His cause because of one’s own self-centeredness and stinginess, one damages one’s own soul. The damage to one’s soul is then transformed into various social problems, especially when individuals come into contact with family and society. There are many problems which are solely or at least partially caused by non-contentment. For instance, the rise of snatch thieves recently in Malaysia. Men, women, old, young, and pregnant ladies all fell victims to this type of theft, and some even succumbed to their injuries.\(^ {35}\) Other examples of problems arising from non-contentment are cases of drug and other substance addictions; and cases of children abandoning their old parents due to non-contentment and self-centredness. The Times of India recently reported a drastic rise of such cases in India, with children abandoning their old parents at places like railway stations. A psychiatrist interpreted this behaviour as ego-centric.\(^ {36}\)

We mentioned earlier that good social relations are feasible through the principle of brotherhood (al-ikhā). Without qanā’ah people will not be able to practice this fundamental virtue.

**Self-Discipline and Human Behaviour in Relation to the Material World**

Our discussion of the human attitude towards livelihood and towards sharing livelihood with others brings us to the understanding that either human can dominate human attitude towards the material realm, or the material world can dominate human attitudes. This applies to both the consumers and the producers. With contentment one may learn self-discipline enhancing the self to maintain control of material consumption both from qualitative and quantitative aspects. Similarly self-discipline may assist producers to take control of the quality and
quantity of their products. Non-contentment produces an opposite effect upon the human character. Profit orientation and other worldly gains fall short of blurring their vision to see the negative effect of immense production on our environment and society. In this state they lose self discipline letting the fancies of the material world take control of their consumption-attitudes. Instead of necessity and sufficient means, consumers embrace brand names, lifestyle designs, and new models of products. For the producers and retailers, profit and worldly gain becomes the basis of promoting their goods with features which could attract as many consumers as possible. This suggests that without self-discipline humans can be enslaved by the material world. Almighty Allah reminds us in the Holy Qur’an (Āl ‘Imrān 3: 14): “Fair in the eyes of men is the love of things they covet”.

Self-discipline is to restrain oneself from adhering to all the dictates of human desires (şahwa) and abiding only those which fulfill genuine needs. The term “zuhd” describes self-discipline and self-renunciation: “Abandoning those lawful [means] beyond need (tarku mā zāda ‘alā ḥajatihi min al-ḥalal)”.37 Self-restraint need not denote renouncing worldly materials entirely, but renouncing that which is beyond proper bounds of need, or renouncing that which one does not have. Sahl b. Sa’d al-Sā’idī reported that: “A man came to the Prophet sallaALLAHu ‘alayhi wa sallam and said: “O Messenger of Allah, advise me on a deed which if I perform, Allah will love me and the people will love me. The Prophet sallaALLAHu ‘alayhi wa sallam replied: “Renounce the pleasure of the world, Allah will love you, and renounce that which is in the hands of people, people will love you”.38

This hadith calls for moderate consumption of material resources. The first part encourages us to consume only according to need, and doing so honours the human with love of Almighty Allah. The second part, “renounce that which is in the hands of people”, signifies that one should consume or produce within one’s own means. One’s personal endeavour should not lead to a consumption level which will usurp the resources of other fellow humans. Letting fellow humans enjoy their share of resources will honour them with love and respect. This is well supported by another hadith which states: “The one who takes from the material world more than his needs digs his own grave without realizing.”39 By consuming and producing beyond proper bounds of need humans tap the earth’s natural resources excessively, and invite environmental calamities upon themselves.

We should understand from these teachings that with contentment and proper discipline, humans may do good both to fellow humans and to their environment. They can control their nature of dependence on the material world. Self discipline will assist them to decide between what they need and what they think or imagine they need. Of course, advertising is the science of implanting unnecessary desires in our souls.
Self-Discipline as a Constituent of Individual and Civilisational Renewal

Human character and attitudes stand on the front line when it comes to renewal (islāḥ) and reform (tajdīd). The Qur’ān explains this better (al-Ra‘d 13:11) “Verily Allah never will change the condition of a people until they change what is in their souls”. The Qur’ān interpreter, al-Alūsī (d. 1270/1853) in commenting on this verse quoted, a hadith qudsī reported by ‘Alī tablīḥu. The précis of the hadith is that Almighty Allah says: Those who were involved in my disliked-disobedience then turned towards my beloved deeds of obedience, I will surely change My Punishment of them into My Mercy. Those who were involved in my beloved deeds of obedience, then turned towards my disliked-disobedience, I will surely change My mercy for them into My punishment.” 40 This verse and its interpretation sheds light on the external situation of humans based on their inner state of soul and morality. Be it spiritual, or environmental, or social, or financial, the inner state of humans plays a crucial role for any positive outcome. This verse imparts that humans are to discipline their lower desires in relation to consumption and behaviour. If appetitive desire is not controlled, it can take the form of compulsion in obtaining what one does not have. Theft, rape, violence, war, air and water pollution, food scarcity and other forms of social, environmental, financial, and political corruption are all usufructs of the undisciplined inner human state. Similarly, for contemporary external developments, humans need to maintain their inner development.

Inner development is the Islamic concept of “human development”. Without this development, the human-wilderness, including corruption, violence, self-centeredness and immorality, will be at a par with its sophisticated technological infrastructure. A simple example of this mismatch is the poor civil etiquette of people living in developed cities like Kuala Lumpur. The saying “in first world infrastructure with third world mentality” is a consequence of such situations.

Civilisation is about humans existing together and interacting with people and the environment around them in an appropriate and balanced way. 41 To achieve this, humans need to control their inner appetitive desires when dealing with each other and when dealing with the material world. The inner self will decide the nature of his action. Self-discipline will generate good actions which will be beneficial for him, his fellow humans, and the environment. The Qur’ān states (Fātit 35:18): “And whoever purifies himself does so for the benefit of his own soul”. The concept of purification of inner-self (tazkiyat al-nafs) or self-discipline if rendered in other words is the implication of this verse which holds great promise for civilisation. By self-discipline a decaying civilisation can rejuvenate itself from within.
Conclusion and Recommendations

From the Islamic perspective, qanāʿah is a defining element of self-renewal both for the individual and society. Within frugal-contentment also abides the moral dimension of the Islamic vision of reform and renewal (islāḥ wa tajdid). It is through qanāʿah that individuals and societies determine the nature of their dependence on the material world, how they relate to their environment, and their quest for self discipline. Civilisational renewal is only feasible when the spiritual principles of Islam are manifested in the outer conduct of society. Tajdid which is concerned with “inner moral and spiritual transformation” and islāḥ which looks into “external aspects of religion” have to be integral. This notion perfectly fits the classical idea of ṭaṣawwuf and sulūk. Taṣawwuf works on the inner aspect of the human in strengthening our spiritual relationship with God while sulūk works on the human character and our manifestation in external human conduct. It would be fruitless if one perfects one of the two and neglects the other. Our discussion of qanāʿah has shown how contentment and its opposite appetitive-desire are interconnected with individuals and with societies. The portrait of qanāʿah showed that contentment as a positive human character encourages generosity in one’s treatment of fellow humans. And appetitive-desire is a negative human character which can lead to self-satisfaction and fulfilment of personal needs even at the expense of damage to other individuals, societies, nations, or corporations. Contentment works positively in the opposite manner to build bonds of integrity and integration.

The overview of qanāʿah also revealed that the contemporary concerns about social and environmental problems frequently are related to the aftermath of the problem. Thus, curbing pollution is related to waste management, which deals with the waste already out there. By contrast, the vital concept of qanāʿah is mainly concerned with actual human behaviour in relation to the material world, which is the breeding ground for social and environmental problems. This means qanāʿah could prevent social and environmental problems while they are still in their early stages.

- Examining the role qanāʿah should play in peoples’ lives and how various other aspects of life are interconnected with this virtue, we recommend that this concept be included in civic and ethics modules taught in public schools along with its related social-ethical dimensions.

- We also recommend that qanāʿah be positioned as a central policy for industries, manufacturers, factories, supermarkets, hotels, restaurants, and all those premises which deal with edible or non-edible items—in so far as government guidance makes this reality.
Notes

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1. ‘Ali b. Abī Bakr al-Haithamī, Majma‘ al-Zawā’id wa Manba‘ al-Fawā’id (n.p.: Mu’assisat al-Ma‘ārif, 1406), vol. 8, p. 191. In this hadith, noble character-traits was expressed by the phrase ‘ṣāliḥ al-Akhlaq’. It also occurs with the phrase: makārim al-akhlāq.


5. Ibid., p. 49.


8. Ibid., p. 50.

9. Sahīḥ al-Bukhārī, hadith no. 127. The meaning is that this person’s fasting is not accepted by Allah.


11. Ibid., p. 102.


p. 178. This is a summary of al-Tabari’s explanation.

19. Ibid.


34. Ibid., vol. 2, 355.
42. Ibid., 52-54.