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The essence of 'Divine' Mercy

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Mercy, compassion, benevolence, empathy, clemency, generosity ... the synonyms go on and on. The richness of this wonderful attribute and the various forms of it manifest the positive, and spiritually sublime, character of the human psyche.

All positive characteristics, properties and adjectives of human nature are to be found in the Creator, but obviously, His are of an inherent and undefined nature, whereas humans only carry out functions with the help of what they have been bestowed upon by the Divine Architect.

Mercy is that attribute of Allah the Almighty which He himself proudly expresses time and time again in His final divine book, the Noble Qur'an. So much so, that He begins every chapter, but one, in the Glorious Qur'an with this verse, "In the name of Allah, the Divinely Compassionate, the Ever-Merciful."¹

The *basmalah* is yet one of His expressions of His love for this very nature, if you allow me, of Mercy. Only two attributive of many attributive names, of the Lord of the Universe, have been mentioned therein; individually carrying more weight than what lies between the heavens and the earth, combined they stand unrivalled in all their glory and in each and every context.

Many a reference emphasises the importance of this 'divine' attribute. For example:

"When Allah completed the creation, He wrote the following, which is with Him on His throne, 'My mercy overcomes My wrath'.²

"My mercy overtakes My wrath."³

"Allah has divided mercy into one hundred parts, and He kept ninety-nine portions with Him and sent down one portion to the earth, and because of that, one single portion, His creatures are merciful to each other, so that even the mare lifts up its hoof away from its foal, so that she would not trample on it."⁴

"When Allah created the heavens and the earth, He created one hundred 'mercies', each one can cover what is between the earth and the heaven. He allocated to the earth only one, with which the mother is compassionate with her child; the beast and the bird are compassionate with their babies. When the Day of Judgment comes, Allah will complete His mercy."⁵

"...Your Lord has ordained mercy upon Himself..."⁶

"...And My mercy embraces all things..."⁷

Some children and women prisoners-of-war were brought before the Prophet (s) and there, a woman amongst them, her bosom was full of milk, and she found her baby boy amongst the captives, she took him over her breast and nursed him. The Prophet (s) said to his companions, 'Do you think that this lady would throw her baby boy in the fire?' They replied, 'No, if she has the power not to throw him in the fire.' The Prophet (s) said, 'Allah is more merciful to His servants than this lady is to her son.'⁸

The Arabic word for 'mercy', is *rahmah*, an infinitive noun, from the root word, or letters when anglicised, *r-h-m*. All words derived from this very root denote mercy, either directly or indirectly. We may take, as an example, *Rahman* – The Divinely Compassionate, in such that His characteristics of mercy and benevolence know no bounds and are unparalleled,

rahm – the womb, in such that the foetus is at its weakest throughout its physical existence and the mother, herself at a vulnerable stage, does her utmost in order to ensure the safeguard and protection of the life she carries within her, *marhum* – the deceased, in such that he is now at the 'mercy' of the afterlife and whatever it may encounter in the 'other' world, etc.

Mercy surpasses many references of synonymity with respect to attributes and descriptive expressions in such that it itself adheres to goodness prior to as well as after the commission of a guilt. Being just may refer to a nobility but that only brings to par what was designed to be there. One may take a tooth for a tooth, and equality has been thereby achieved, justice has been done, the adversaries are on parallel footing and social balance has been maintained. It is mercy that has established the scales of justice in the first place. Mercy prepared the social climate in order for justice, equality and rights and obligations to flourish.

Similarly, forgiveness may be far superior to justice itself, where it lays the foundations of a diverse and tolerant society. It encourages the 'turn-the-other-cheek' phenomenon by forgiving the oppressor where individual private rights are infringed. Again, mercy is what forgiveness is founded upon.

Mercy, hence, is something which begets other forms of goodness, be they based on rights or on grace and favours.

The mercy of Allah cannot be explained, as with any other aspect of His being, yet He so affectionately reminds us of it in every step, as if it were something of a self-explanatory nature. He says:

“[It is] the Divinely Compassionate [one who has] taught the Qur'an; He created man, He taught him [the art of] expression.”⁹

The teaching of the Qur'an – a complete code of human existence, and universal co-existence, and of everything man may require in order to lead a life of success and virtue. *He created man and He taught him the art of expression* – an art man shares with the Creator but to an incomparable level, an art which differentiates man from inarticulate animals, an art which blesses rightful dignity to man and which helps him elevate himself from below the status of an illiterate beast to above that of the holy angels.

The mercy of Allah Almighty surrounds our very existence from before we are born till after our death overtakes us, a bit like an unseen, unobserved and hardly virtual force-field. The foetus in the womb is

blanketed with layers and layers of cushion-like tissue, the infant is vulnerable to its very own surroundings and therefore its body is more tolerant, the adult, in his prime, is strong enough to bear the knocks, twists and strains of daily life and the elderly man has by now enough experience to take him to the furthest limits of the remainder of his life.

Allah Almighty blessed us unforgiving and self-centred humans with a blessing; a certain type of mercy which would envelope all other forms of mercy. It came in the form of a man named Muhammad – *may the peace and blessings of Allah Almighty shower upon him for ever and ever.*

The Qur'an, in the divine expression of the Creator, says: “We have not sent you (O Beloved Messenger Muhammad) but as a mercy to all the worlds.”¹⁰

The word 'worlds' may refer to planets, phases of existence, parallel worlds and all of creation. Irrespective of whichever way we may look at it, the Beloved Messenger of Allah (s) is a Mercy to everything that is, was or will ever be. It is his creation, by the Creator, to which all of creation owes its existence.¹¹ Allah Almighty created with His attribute of *Rahman* – the divinely Compassionate -, and He initialised this creation process with the creation of His Beloved Messenger, whom He sent as a Mercy to everything. The *rahmah* of the Creator is manifest in the being of the *rahmah* Prophet – Muhammad (s). How sublime and amazing the intentions of the Lord are!

From the aforesaid, we may infer that it can only be mercy for which Allah the Almighty created whatever He created. He created us in order to shower us with His mercy, in order to send His 'Mercy' (s) to us and in order for us to express the same.

Mercy has always played a major role in the development of the human society and the downfall of man and of civilisation has been based on the lack of it. As with all nations before us, we Muslims have also been obliged to practise this goodness.

The Prophet (s) made utmost efforts to clarify the reality of the mercy of Allah Almighty to His servants so that we Muslims will be merciful to one another and also be merciful to others, and know that this mercy is the way to gain the mercy of Allah Almighty.

“The merciful people will have mercy bestowed upon them by Allah. Be merciful with those on earth, so

He who is in the heaven(s) (Allah) will have mercy on you."¹²

"Allah will not have mercy on the one who does not have mercy on people."¹³

"He who does not show mercy [to others] is not to be shown mercy to."¹⁴

The Prophet (s) told us about a sinning man, and a fornicating woman, both of whom Allah Almighty forgave of their sins due to their mercy and kindness with a thirsty dog, so they gave it water to drink.¹⁵

While the Companions were once travelling with the Prophet (s), they noticed a bird that had two chicks, so they took away the two chicks. Thereafter, the bird came and started to flap its wings. When the Prophet (s) came back, he asked: 'Who has deprived this (bird) of its chicks? Return its chicks to it.'¹⁶

The Beloved Prophet of Allah practised what he preached, in order to teach us how we are to perform our deeds of mercy on others. His forgiveness of his worst enemies, including Abu Sufyan, who had fought incessantly against him for twenty years and Habshi, who had slain his beloved uncle Hamzah (Allah be pleased with him), at a time when a mere gesture would have had either of them ripped into a million pieces and blown away in the wind without a trace like threads of cotton; such indications are of the divine attribute of mercy. Such mercy being showered upon the worst of the worst, in order to render them the best of the best – no-one can argue that both Abu Sufyan and Habshi died with the noble honour of being a Sahabi. Such was the mercy pouring beautifully out of the heart of this man, that one ceases to believe that this man alone can achieve such a feat of moral supremacy, and that Allah Himself must have prepared Muhammad (s) with His own will fed into him so that we may understand how the Divine wants us to understand Mercy, so that we may show mercy in order to win His mercy.

When we talk of human mercy, natural mercy or divine mercy, what are we, in essence, wanting to understand? Surely, all mercy, human or divine, is always divine, from whence it emanates.

To speak of divine mercy, we pretend to differentiate 'various forms' of mercy; indeed, all mercy is Divine Mercy, and the gateway to divine mercy is he whom the Lord Himself calls 'Mercy' to all things, indistinctively. The gateway to divine mercy is the Beloved Messenger Muhammad – *upon whom we invoke the peace and blessings of Allah Almighty for ever and ever.*

¹ This is known as the *basmalah*, entered before almost every chapter of the Noble Qur'an.

² Agreed Upon.

³ Agreed Upon.

⁴ Agreed Upon.

⁵ *Sahih Muslim*.

⁶ Qur'an 6:54.

⁷ Qur'an 7:156.

⁸ Agreed Upon.

⁹ Qur'an 55:1-4.

¹⁰ Qur'an 21:107.

¹¹ Hadith: *law laa-Ka lamaa khalaqTu 'l-aflaak* [al-Hakim – *Mustadrak*, al-Bayhaqi - *Dala'il al-Nubuwwah*, al-Tabarani – *al-Kabir*, Abu Nu'aym – *Hilyah*, Ibn Asakir – *Tarikh Damishq*, al-Daylami – *Musnad al-Firdaws*, etc., etc.], from Abdullah ibn Abbas, Umar ibn al-Khattab and from others in various chains and texts.

¹² *Sunan Abi Dawud, Sunan al-Tirmidhi*.

¹³ *Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan al-Tirmidhi*.

¹⁴ Agreed upon.

¹⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim*.

¹⁶ *Sahih al-Bukhari, Sunan Abi Dawud, Musnad Ahmad*.