

An Artist's Spiritual Journey

By YUSUF ISLAM (CAT STEVENS)

YUSUF ISLAM FOUNDATION



Yusuf Islam is the celebrated British Muslim educator and activist, still known by millions of people for his music and words as Cat Stevens. One of the world's most famous converts to Islam, he embraced Islam in 1977 and went on to become an energetic supporter of Islamic education in the UK, where he established Islamia Schools, founded Muslim charities as well as pioneering the English Islamic

Nasheed & Spoken Word genre. He recently returned to engaging the mainstream media through recordings and performances due to the increasing negativity towards Islam. In 2014 he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

One of the greatest rhetorical questions to be asked of any human being is that which the Quran asks us: *So Where Are You Going?* There are three basic requisites to reach a goal: know what the goal is; identify the means or path to that goal; reach the goal safely.

Before discovering Islam, this was my major problem, I didn't know what my real goal was. I grew up in the centre of London back in the '50s, it was after the end of the Second World War and everybody wanted to enjoy the peace which had just been won. There were lots of opportunities to be happy and have fun, especially where I lived, close to Piccadilly Circus and Oxford Street, an area full of theatres, cinemas, clubs, shops, hotels and restaurants.

Soon I realised that the world was a big place and there was no certainty that I would ever be able to enjoy life because you needed money to enjoy yourself. All I had was a strong imagination and some ability with a pen and brush to communicate through art.

When the music explosion of the '60s happened, it was a perfect opportunity to pick up a guitar and chase my dreams to find wealth and happiness. I chose to call myself 'Cat' and was very lucky to make a record which sold thousands of copies. Soon I made a big hit and was considered one of the top up-coming pop stars. But that didn't last long. After a year of success I fell sick with TB and was taken to hospital. Then came the big question in my mind: 'What would have happened if I had died; where was I going?'

The question led me to a long search for a satisfactory answer. I had studied Christianity at school but there were many doubts I still had, so I

looked at Buddhism. After a while I began writing and singing new songs about my spiritual journey and people liked my music even more than before. The USA and Europe loved my message; I sang the thoughts and hopes of my generation, dreaming of a more peaceful and happy world.

Although I made a lot of money and many people loved me and my music, I was not satisfied. I kept looking for the answer to my questions. I continued to read more books about different philosophies and spiritual paths.

Then, in the middle of the '70s, when I was swimming in the Pacific ocean I had an experience which was to change my life forever. The ocean was too strong that day and I was losing all my strength and power to keep afloat. There was no one around to help me at that moment. So I looked up towards the heavenly sky and prayed,

"Oh God! If you save me I'll work for you."

Not a single second had passed before a wave from behind me came and gently pushed me forward. Within a minute I had found my strength and was back on land and still alive.

It was after that my brother had visited Jerusalem and seen the Mosque and the beautiful Muslim way of prayer. He came back and bought me a present of the Quran for me to read. My answer had arrived.

The beginning chapter of the Quran taught me the answers to the three steps to the goal of happiness. Firstly, in *al-Fatihah*, it told me that the purpose of existence is to know and praise the one God, Lord and King of the entire universe. Secondly, it told me that the means to reach everlasting happiness you must follow the 'Straight Path' back to Him. Then thirdly the rest of the Quran goes on to explain the details of how to reach that goal.

My journey had reached an Earthly climax and I finally set foot upon the glittering golden sands and birthplace of Islam

I made my *shahadah* (declaration of faith) and embraced Islam in 1977. It was the most beautiful of times and a new Mosque had just been built in London, paid for by the King of Saudi Arabia. It was the happiest year for me just to be left in peace to learn my prayers and grow in my knowledge. I wanted to complete my Islam and so I fasted and paid my *zakat* (alms). But it soon became my over-riding wish to visit the House of God in Makkah and fulfil the duty of Hajj. So in

1980 I obtained a visa from the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Belgrave Square. Then I booked my ticket and swiftly read up on the rituals I would have to perform.

As the plane touched down in Jeddah, I felt an overwhelming sense of purpose and destiny. My journey had reached an Earthly climax and I finally set foot upon the glittering golden sands and birthplace of Islam; the blessed land where Abraham had left his first son, Ishmael and his mother, Hajar, peace be upon them. Here I felt the atmosphere and closeness to my lifelong purpose, following the footsteps of the last Prophet Muhammad, ﷺ peace be upon him.

My heart was humbled as I pondered what a privilege it was for me to be chosen out of hundreds of millions of people to visit the Holy House – The Kaaba – and pray in the very place where Abraham and Ishmael had by their own hands had raised the blessed stones and built its four cuboid walls. The feeling was indescribable. It seemed that there was no material distance between me and God.

“La baik! I am here (at your service), oh my Lord, I am here!”

On my return to London the world seemed different. It was harsh and unforgiving; conflicts and wars were spreading and the name of Islam was being dragged down by the media with increased regularity. My wish was to share the feeling of peace and happiness which I had now found. So I began working in *da'wah*, education and relief. My music activity had stopped because of certain doubts, even though there was nothing specific in the Quran about the subject and the word music was not mentioned directly. Also the al-Azhari Imam at the central mosque told me that I could continue within certain moral boundaries.

Years passed and due to the increased antagonism between Western and Muslim cultures, I realised that the harmony and friendship between nations and peoples were desperately needed again. People in the West are still looking for happiness but they have been taught by the media to believe they can never find it in Islam.

I made a deep study into the subject and decided to sing my song ‘Peace Train’ again. So as to show that there is allowance in having different opinions within certain areas of the Shari’ah, I wrote a book called ‘Why I Still Carry A Guitar’ to provide evidences on the issue.

There are many ways to work for God. Returning to the medium of music and modern platforms of communication was important; the Prophet, peace be upon him, said, ‘Speak to people according to the level they understand, do you want God and His messenger to be rejected?’²

There is so much to teach about Islam and the peace and happiness it can bring to humanity. Let us think about this: how many people know there are four sacred months of the year in which fighting and war are forbidden by Allah ﷻ in the Quran? Primarily this was meant in order for tribes and people to travel to Makkah without fear of attack, answering the call of Abraham to worship God in peace and unity. Imagine if all the nations of the world adopted this formula and people were allowed to breath the air of peace, go about their business and return to their families again without fear of bombs or bullets for one whole third of the year, would that not make them think twice about blackening their faces, picking up guns and diving back into the trenches? They might then realise that Islam has a lot to offer them.

Indeed, we Muslims still have as much to learn as we have to teach. **■**

The Kiswah (cloth covering) of the Kaaba is traditionally lifted during the Hajj period, revealing its granite brick structure



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¹Al Takwir’ 81:

²Sahih al Bukhari