

“Inner and Outer Change on The Sair ul-Suluk”

by

Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

Lecture delivered at a weekend retreat on Change
At the Zawiya of Shaykh Nurudeen Durkee
Saturday, January 20, 2007

Suratul Fatihah: Asalaam alaykum wa Rahmatullahe wa Barakatuhu

Bismillah ar Rahman ir Raheem; al Hamdu llahi Rabbi Alameen ar Rahman ir Raheem; wa salaatu wa salaamu alay Muhammad wa ala alahi wa sallim.

Allahummanfa'nee bi-maa allamtanee wa 'allimnee maa yanfa'uunee warzuuqnee 'ilmanyyanfa'uunee.

O Allah! Benefit me by that which You have taught me, and teach me that which will benefit me, and provide me with that knowledge which benefits me.

Allahumma innee as'aslooka khaira maa'aatee wa maa 'af'aluu wa khaira maa batana wa maa zahara.

O Allah, I beg of You the best of what I bring (commit) and of what I do, and the good of what is concealed and what is apparent.

INTRODUCTION

Change can be looked at from many perspectives. The English saying “*The only thing that never changes is change itself,*” speaks a lot about perception, hopes, and expectation. In fact, often change is about perspective, as reflected in the saying of Mevlana Jelalludin Rumi, “*It is through necessity that the means of perception are developed; therefore, oh man, increase your necessity.*” Our task today is to look at the subject of change *vis a vis* the revelations on change in

Qur'an. How can we understand what Allah tells us about change, and how can we apply it as a conscious and useful tool in transforming our lives? How can we apply it as a tool for the purposeful fulfillment of our outer obligations and inner potentialities so that, as we transition or change from this world to the next, we have made progress and contributed to the well-being of others, fulfilling our duty to Allah Swt, and creating for our self a better place in the hereafter?

There are many aspects of Islam that affirm the ability of the human being to change. Qur'an recognizes the rights, if not duty, of every individual to change, and with that, the corollary responsibility of society to support each person's personal transformation. Think, for example, of the Prophet's (sal) teaching that if your enemy asks for peace then you give them peace. In this way, even the enemies of the Prophet (sal) were afforded the right to change. Qur'an says:

Qul li-lladheena kafaruu iñy-yañtahuu yughfar lahum maa qad^a salafa wa'iñy-ya^cuuduu fa-qad^a madat sunnatu-l-'awwaleen 8:38

Tell those who cover up [the Truth] that if they stop [persecuting the believers], that which is past will be forgiven them. And if they revert [to hostility], the example of [what happened to] the ancients gone before[shall come to pass against them]. 8:38

Qur'an teaches that we all have the right and the ability to change, to transform our character, our station, our self. Not only can we change, but the journey of life is about change. I will look today at the subject of change in the context of the *sair ul suluk*, paying particular attention to the tools Allah has given us to refine the aspects of our inner and outer self, so that we may transform ourselves into beings more able to love and be loved by Him.

THE SAIR UL SULUK IS ABOUT CHANGE

Allah says in Qur'an,

“Wa’innaa ilaa Rabbinaa lamuñqalibuun”

“Verily to our Lord we are indeed to return.” 43:14

Allah tells us also in Qur'an,

“...innaa li-Llaahi wa’innaa ilayhi raaji’uun”

“...Truly we belong to Allah and truly to Him we return.” 2:156

The story of Adam and Hawa (*‘alayhum salaam*), who in *Jannah* were disobedient to Allah (swt) and therefore were removed and placed on this earth, is the essential story of change. It is a story of souls destined to change through their journey away from, and back to, Allah (swt). They were destined to learn discipline, to learn responsibility — the ability to respond to the reality, the Tawhid. and to experience, the *ser ul suluk*, the journey to the worlds of the *latayf*, through the different centers of awareness and stations on the path

What Allah knew that the angels didn't know was that the distance of this journey, the distance between His creatures and Himself is only a matter of perception, relative to His divine Names, His attributes, as they are embedded in creation. The prophet Adam (as) discovered that the means to return to *Jannah* was through this world, through the physical being affirming, glorifying, praising the Creator in word and deed. He discovered that the journey is to move from a sense of being separate and outcast and unworthy or arrogant and short-sighted, to a reaffirmation

of the Unity of Allah, being inclusive, included, and content. It is the attention and effort to engage in activities that shift our understanding, perspective, and purpose that automatically creates the opening for Allah's response.

As Allah says in Qur'an:

*Dhaalika bi'anna-Llaaha lam yaku mughayyiran ni'matan an'amahaa
'alaa qawmin hattaa yughayyiruu maa bi'añfusihim wa anna-Llaaha
samee'un 'aleem*

"...Allah does not change the grace He has bestowed on a people until they change what is in themselves." 8:53

To make the *sair ul suluk* from *dunya* to *Jannah*, back to the awareness of the Divine Presence, it is necessary that we have to undergo change. As soon as we are born, we begin to change from the state we were in *fitrah*/purity. In order to return to that state of *fitrah*, we have to recognize the necessity for change. What is it that has to change? We have to change the state of our hearts, which implies that we have to change the state of our character from disobedient to obedient, from the one who wants to *be* served to the one who serves; from the one who wants to control, own, and determine, to the one who submits to the will of Allah. We must become an *abd*, a Muslim, a *mu'min*: one who learns; one who submits; a true believer.

My beloved *shaykh*, Hazrat Azad Rasool (ra), defined the *sair ul suluk* as “...traveling to the spiritual stations one after the other in an infinite spiritual journey. This requires perseverance and different daily recitations to accomplish.” By traveling the path, the ignorant person becomes the wise, beautiful, well-refined being. That person transforms, and their *ruh* becomes able to express its potential. It moves unimpeded across time and space, following the

current of consciousness that is Allah (Swt). The *nafs* becomes the lampshade and the *ruh* is the light. It becomes *nur al nur*, light upon light; and the self becomes the contented self, the fulfilled self, the fulfilling self, and one becomes free.

To achieve the potential of our self, there is a need for a certain watchfulness and awareness of our current state. In many schools of Sufism, this is developed on the *sair ul suluk* through certain methodology and practices, which we refer to as meditation, but which include a *khatem*, *wazifa*, *tafakkur*, reading and recitation of Qur'an, and *muraqabah*. These practices offer a unique way of opening or awakening the 10 *lataa'if* (subtle centers of perception) to their potential; which I will speak more about later.

When one develops this watchful and aware state, when one really is attentive, when there is *tawajjuh*, then Allah reveals to us where we are, where we need to go, who we are, and *Hu* we belong to and are a part of. Sometimes, we become painfully aware of who we are and where we need to go. But we must not forget that this revelation is a great blessing. It is a sign of real accomplishment when a person submits in this life and accepts the bitter with the sweet, realizing that this journey is one of developing character and faith, based on the ability to see oneself and to see a greater presence behind one's own self. If all we accomplish in this realization is a harmonization between our inner self and our outer self, this is a tremendous accomplishment for a human being. Yet in the *tariqah*, it is a common experience. It is built into the system. There are levels to the stations of the *sair ul suluk* that allow us to ascend in awareness of those Divine attributes, attributes that have been placed within us, attributes which, with guidance and perseverance, will eventually coalesce as our character.

Undertaking these changes requires that we cultivate emotional balance, an active intellect, and reason, a sense of justice, and a heart capable of profound love and

trust. As a result of developing these qualities, we develop a higher awareness of the laws that guide us: the *sharee'ah*—not just the details of how to do this and that, but the real essence of the *sharee'ah* as a broad boulevard; the broad roadway upon which the believer travels. We develop a watchfulness, an attentiveness, a discipline and control over our *nafs amarra*, the un-regenerate self. To discipline our *nafs amarra*, we must treat it as if it is a disobedient or ignorant, untrained being, and inculcate in it the values of *ikhlas* (sincerity), *sabr* (patience), insight (*basira*), *'adl* (justice), *rahmat* (compassion and mercy), *haqq* (truth), and *salaam* (peace). Recognizing that those, and the rest of the 99 Attributes of Allah (swt), comprise the essence of all things and are also in the core of our being increases our awareness of, and piety for Allah Swt. By establishing in ourselves a level of *ibaada* (worship) and *dhikrullah* (remembrance of Allah) that manifests the beauty and perfection of Allah, [it] eventually allows us to be the journeyer on the journey of those who are contented, conscious, and free; the journey that those who have been freed, traveled.

In this process of training our self, both the Divine guidelines (the *sharee'ah*) and the reasonableness and rationality of the mind have to be considered. Both have value because both produce transformation in the self. Without reason and rationality, one would not be able to interpret the *sharee'ah* and apply it. Without the *sharee'ah*, the rationality would not have anything to be guided by. The broad boulevard takes us from one place to another, under our own power, like a vehicle on the road. As our heart becomes changed, as we develop our awareness of the path, each of the ten *lataa'if* (subtle centers of perception) becomes awakened. The *qalb*, *ruh*, *sirr*, *khafee*, *akhfa*, and *nafs*, along with the other elements, *earth*, *air*, *water*, *fire* that compose this creation, all guide us to the awareness of how close Allah (Swt) really is.

To become aware of our essential being, our essential state, our *fitrah*, and create an environment where the *lataa'if* can reach their potential, we have to achieve a level of submission and surrender to the will of Allah, make our effort and then let things happen. We have to understand that the rational mind and the *nafs amarra* have to be guided to humility, because knowledge sometimes builds arrogance. If we give in to our *nafs amarra*, it doesn't just mean giving in to your desires or that you are a bad person. It means that the more we give in to our *nafs amarra*, the greater the possibility that we will never understand what's inside of us. We will never understand what is at the core of our being; never complete the journey of change. We will never know our self and therefore we will never know Allah. We will never be able to fulfill our *amanah* with our *Rabb* because we will have performed the greater *shirk*. The Prophet (sal) said that the lower self is the greatest idol. A believer on the path has to be committed to daily perseverance in transforming their lowest, darkest self to the highest level of awareness of the Truth, the *nur* of Allah. That's the journey of refinement; that is the purpose of traveling to the spiritual stations on the *sair ul suluk*.

In *Suratul Baqarah* Allah says,

Allaahu wa liyyu-lladheena aamanuu yukhrijuhum mina-dh-dhulumaati ilaa-n-nuuri wa-lladheena kafaruu awliyaaa'uhumu-t-taaghutu yukhrijuunahum mina-n-nuuri ilaa-dh-dhulumaati ulaaa'ika as-haabu-n-naari hum feehaa khaaliduun 2:257

“Allah is a protecting friend of those who believe. He takes them out of darkness and into light. And for those who disbelieve, their patrons are false deities who bring them out of light into darkness. Such are rightful owners of the fire; they will reside therein.” 2:257

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF LOVE

How do we accomplish changing the self, transforming the *nafs* from darkness into light? The core of change is to know oneself, and the core of knowing oneself is loving oneself, for the sake of Allah, for the same reasons that Allah loves us.

In *Suratul Baqarah* Allah says,

Wa'idhaa saalaka 'ibaadee 'annee fa'innee qareebun ujeebu da'wata-d-daa'i idhaa da'aani fa-lyastajeebuu lee wa lyu'minuu bee la'allahum yarshuduun

**“And when My worshipers ask you about Me, so [know that] I am near. I answer the call of the caller when he calls Me, so let them respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may be rightly guided.”
2:186**

In a *hadith* it states that,

When a person draws near to Allah through abundant worship, Allah then tells the Angel Jibreel to take his or her name and announce it throughout the heavens and the earth, “Oh people, know that Allah loves so-and-so.” [Tirmithi and Bukari]

Through love we are empowered by Allah’s love to change. Love is one of the greatest catalysts for change. When you fall in love you want to become what your beloved wants; you want to change those things about yourself that are not “love-able.” Love, more than anything else, gives us the motivation, the confidence to change our deepest, darkest faults. Just the same, loving Allah and

knowing Allah loves us beyond comprehension is motivation for the journey of the *Sair ul Suluk*.

Everything that is created by Allah (SwT), from paradise to hell, is an expression of His love for His creation; this love is directed toward creation and its creatures. All who express the Divine Presence through seeking the Divine Presence can awaken to Who is Present. In this way, our love is love directed from Allah, towards Allah, in Allah, for Allah, by Allah, and received by Allah. So, in some cosmic sense, we could say that Allah is self-centered. We certainly say, “There is only Allah...” many times each day. *Illallah*. Would it not make sense, then, that if creation is a reflection of Allah’s own consciousness that the essential struggle in that creation is self-centeredness? The disease and the cure are always very close to each other.

Each one of us cares about ourselves too much; and our love, in itself, is selfish. It is not obvious to us that there is a Divine presence behind, within, and surrounding every act. It is not obvious to us that Allah is present in everything and everyone we love, and in everything and everyone that we care for. So we act selfishly, or defensively, or aggressively, or fearfully, or greedily; and we do not realize that it is Allah (SwT) who is disguised as the one whom we love, or in the things that we love, or as the work that we love, or the goals that we embrace and love, or the rewards that we seek.

Allah says in Qur’an,

Alam tara anna-Llaaha yusabbihu lahu mañ fee-s-samaawaati wa-l-’ardi wa-t-tayru saaffatiñ kulluñ qad^a ‘alima salaatahu wa tasbeehahu wa-Llaahu ‘aleemum bima yaf^e aluun

“Do you not see that Allah it is Whom everyone in the heavens and the earth glorify, and even the birds, with outstretched wings, each knows its prayer of glorification?” 24:41

When we speak about Allah, we tend to speak of some “being” that is very far off, very distant, as if Allah (Swt) is beyond reach. Some tend to confuse that with the truth that Allah is far beyond our ability to fully understand. Yet, at the same time, when we read the Holy Qur’an, it describes things we know: mercy, compassion, forgiveness, love, patience, caring, leadership, creativity, design, magnificence, beauty, and truth. None of these qualities are totally beyond our comprehension. In fact, not only do we comprehend them, we experience them every day. The tenderness we feel towards one another, towards living things is suffused with Allah. The forgiveness we wish to have or that we give is suffused with Allah. The compassion that immediately rises from our hearts and the mercy that we experience: that is Allah’s Presence. Where is there a place that Allah is not?

We are encouraged and taught to call upon Allah by His attributes (His beautiful names); but because among those beautiful names are some very frightening attributes like *Al Qabid* (the Constrictor), or *Al Khafid* (the Abaser), or *Al Mumit* (the One Who Gives Death), or *Al Muntaqim* (the Avenger), we get confused about how we are to understand, appreciate, and respect those beautiful names that we love so much. We can love Allah (Swt) easily when we see those attributes that are the most positive attributes: forgiveness, mercy, kindness, sweetness, and all the beautiful names. Wherever we find those attributes growing bountiful and in abundance, we are attracted to them, like a moth to the flame. Each creature has its way of loving and attraction, like a mosquito to your blood, a tiger to its prey.

That attraction in human beings is also an attraction to knowledge, and in mystics it is an attraction to knowledge of one's own self. There is no distance, no distinction between knowledge and love in Allah. We have the phrase in English, "To know him is to love him." If you want to know Allah, you will love Allah. There is no separation between them. If you know something, you see it clearly, not just the things you want to see, but all the attributes, all the qualities. But in order to know Allah, one must first know oneself.

Man 'arafa nafsahu, 'arafa rabbahu.

Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord.

We must look at ourselves and ask what endears us to ourselves. If we are honest, we will see that, for most people, it is the good qualities. Ask: what is it about yourself that endears you to yourself? You may answer, "my urge to know," "my sincere effort," "my perseverance." In that answer you have found that which endears you to God. Thinking about our self in this way helps us to facilitate our self's journey, our understanding, and indeed, to appreciate our selves, appreciate our capabilities, appreciate our own efforts, and reinforce them by that appreciation. That appreciation is not ego in the same sense that we are used to understanding it. It is a humble appreciation of a capacity that we didn't know we really had. Yet, when we make the least amount of effort, with sincerity, those qualities begin to manifest. When you affirm these characteristics and aspects of Allah (Swt), He assists you in achieving harmony and balance, peace and understanding. Often, if not consistently, one experiences deep gratitude in these moments of coming to understand oneself and Allah.

We have within us the archetype of perfect human behavior: *fitrah*. We have within us the archetype of the perfect human community and of the perfect

relationship with the Divine, the perfect love, the perfect truth, the perfect care and concern. Every word and every concept is within us. We have to take the time and find our confidence and find our humility. We cannot survive as free human beings or as a community unless we sincerely and diligently look at ourselves in the context of community, in the context of the human community, and in the context of our role with the Divine.

The beauty of Sufism and Islam is that it that encourages us to seek out that confidence and humility. It encourages us to dive deeply, to ask questions, to have discussions, to have profound questions that need and demand to be answered. *Alhamdulillah*, I have not found a question that cannot be answered by this Path. I may have had to pursue it a while to understand how to find the answer. But I have never found anything that stumps me. If you are really looking for answers, you have to be willing to go down a lot of wrong paths and dead ends. You have to be equally willing, when you find the path that does give you the answers, to accept the answers and move on to the next question.

The fact is, a Sufi must develop certainty about ones pursuit of change, must develop a strong commitment to persevere on this dynamic journey. And what is the goal of this journey? “*Anta maksoudi wa ridika matloubi*” “**Oh, Allah, You are my goal and pleasing You is my aim.**” Without that commitment and certainty one cannot really love and cannot really create a lasting change. Everyone has a framework, within and without, through which this change must take place. Such change is not going to come overnight. We can and do strive and at times struggle for ten, fifteen, twenty, and thirty years. But one day, you will be sure; and the capabilities you have will increase exponentially. I cannot even describe what they are, because the language cannot describe them. It is the language of love that is understood before it comes out of your mouth. It is the language of love, before it comes out of your hands in service, or words in poetry.

It is the language of love before it comes out of your feet in moving towards the Beloved. And it is the love that is inherently a willing trust in Allah (Swt) *Ya Wadud*.

ACCEPTING SHAITAN AS A GUIDE

Abdul Qadir Jilani (rah) wrote on this quotation from Qur'an we are discussing today.

How much do I prescribe what you fail to apply? How much do I elaborate, expound, and explain, but you fail to understand? How much do I give, but you do not take? How much do I admonish you, but you will not heed the warning? How hard are your hearts, and how great is their ignorance of Him? If you really knew Him, and believed in the meeting with Him, and were mindful of death and what lies beyond it, you would not be like this. Surely, you have witnessed the deaths of your fathers and your relatives. Surely, you have witnessed the deaths of your kin. So, will you not take warning from them, and restrain yourselves from the pursuit of this world, and from the desire to stay in it forever? Will you not change your hearts, transform them, and expel creatures from them?

*As Allah, Almighty and Glorious is He, has said, **“Allah does not change what is in a people until they change what is in themselves.”** You talk, but you don't act; and when you do act, you are not sincere. Be sensible, and do not misbehave in the Presence of the Lord of Truth. You must acquire strength and conviction, turn in repentance, and reflect. This condition you are now in will do you no good in the hereafter. You are niggardly with yourselves. If only you would treat yourselves generously, you would obtain for them that which is beneficial in the hereafter. You have been preoccupied with what*

must pass away, while missing that which does not pass away. Do not preoccupy yourselves with the accumulation of property or family, because you will very soon be separated from all that. Do not preoccupy yourselves with the pursuit of this world and its creatures, because they can in no way enable you to dispense with Allah.

The tests that we have in this world, all the questions that arise in our minds that we have to find the answers to, the challenges we face, are really examples of the love of Allah that is putting us to a test. We have to persevere. In a *hadith* it is reported that the Prophet (sal) said,

When God cherishes love for a group of people, He puts them to trial...[Tirmidhi]

And in Qur'an it says,

Ahasiba-n-naasu ainy-yutrakuu ainy-yaquuluu aamannaa wa hum laa yuftanuun

Do people imagine that they will be left to say, 'We believe,' and will not be tested? We tested those before them so that Allah would know the truthful and would know the liars. 29:2-3

If you really want peace, and you really recognize that you are on this journey and this path, then you have to accept the guide. He will make you aware of your weaknesses and your faults, and will also then give you guidance on the Path of Truth and keep you in touch with the Almighty. Just as Abdul Qadir Jilani enjoined his students, you have to listen to what is said, and do what is asked to be done, and practice what it is you must practice. If you very quickly learn that, then you can very quickly proceed to die to yourself and know Allah.

Mevlana repeated what the Prophet (sal) said: “...if we do not have a guide, then *shaitan* becomes our guide.” To allow ourselves to remain uncertain about the Divine and our relationship with this creation, nature, other beings, and the universe we swim in, is to allow ourselves to indulge in the self-created complexities of our character’s material nature, without permitting the *marifah* born of the *tariqah* to express its potential and lead us to the truth, *haqiqah*. To misunderstand the passions of life and knowledge that each one of us has, the passions of the love, is to misunderstand the affinity for service and the sacrifice that we are born with. If we remain uncertain about the Divine and our relationship to the Divine, then we are in a downward spiral, and we are at a loss. We have consciously or unconsciously asked for the guidance of *shaitan*. As it says in Qur’an:

Alladheena yañquduuna ‘ahda-Llaahi mim ba‘di meethaaqihi wa yaq‘ta‘uuna maa amara-Llaahu bihi aňy-yuusaala wa yufsiduuna fi-l-‘ardi ulaaa’ika humu-l-khaasiruun

Those who break Allah's contract after it has been agreed, and sever what Allah has commanded to be joined, and cause corruption on the earth, it is they who are the lost. 2:27

And also in *Suratul Baqarah*,

Thumma tawallaytum mim ba‘di dhaalika fa-lawlaa fa-dlu-Llaahi ‘alaykum wa rahmatuhu lakuñtum mina-l-khaasireen

Then after that you turned away, and were it not for Allah's favor to you and His mercy, you would have been among the lost. 2:64

Those of us who were raised with the intellectual and socially liberated viewpoints of society believe that somehow truth lies in our controlling and defining the

circumstances that surround us. Or, at least, it lies in using our creativity to serve our desires and needs (which are most often our wants). These wants and needs have been imbued in us since early childhood in material terms and with material criteria. They are validated by a corrosive and pervasive society. In the 9th century, it was said that the three favorite means for the wiles of *shaitan* to manipulate humans are: rationalism, sentimentalism, and fatalism. If this is still true today then the door is open for *shaitan*. *Shaitan* loves intelligent people, or those who arrogantly believe that they are in control of themselves. Remember, the purpose of the lower nature is the purpose of *shaitan*. Its purpose is to separate us from the Divine, separate us from the will to change our state, by confusing and deceiving us, or by apathy or by rigidity. Our love of power or sense of self-importance takes the place of our need and love for Allah.

There is something gravely wrong in our world. It is manifest in illness, in the contagions that swarm over our planet. It is manifest in social unrest, in genocide, in economic exploitation, in spiritual eclecticism, in ecological devastation, in social depravity, educational degeneration, and political opportunism, just to mention a few. Our “fall from innocence” in the garden of Eden is lived out, and re-lived, everyday in *dunya*. We yearn for re-discovery, for purity, to turn back the clock of our lives. But each day, the addiction calls us to the home of the destroyer, and the yearning itself is the warrant that condemns us. Avoiding the history and this cycle, this pollution, and this source of dis-ease is the denial of the neurotic, the fear of the guilty, the doubt of the disbeliever.

If we hope at all to shift the paradigm and to see through the eyes of one who has returned from wandering in the confusion of the world we live in, we must carve out an inner place that is safe and secure from the forces of outer conditioning and desires. The willingness, ability, and desire to change internally are the means to liberate one self from conditioning. **“Change me, O Lord, not my**

circumstance” is a teaching we are familiar with that illustrates the principle, the internal focus that is necessary.

Another way to look at this paradigm shift is to consider in ourselves the ability to leap forward, out of the old mind-set of action and in-action, to something we either never knew existed, or were sure was out of reach. We do not have to live in a fight-or-flight paradigm, or in the victim-or-victimized paradigm, or in the success-failure paradigm, or the weak-strong paradigm, or the survive-or-perish paradigm. Unless we allow ourselves to watch the drama of life from a distance, and unless we are willing to accept that *shaitan* might be the guide in those brief moments, we will never see how absorbed we are in ourselves, and how deceived we allow ourselves to be. Only when we see that can we turn to the real guides and masters.

The Sufi, the real Muslim, does not deny, but accepts the circumstances of life, the problems of the world, as the ground-note of reality. The real believer doesn't avoid the history. Instead, it is the task of our life to control the weaknesses, not the circumstances; to affirm the love in the core of our hearts. In our seeking recollection and rejoinder with our Source, with the primary aspect of our nature, we must not be distracted by romanticized beauty and attraction of *dunya* (this world). It is with the realization of the brevity of life, in the physical sense, and the eternity of love and peace, that we truly live and truly breathe. With that realization we can confront ourselves, our illusions, and our realities, and broaden the boundaries of our knowledge and insight.

Unless we turn our yearning for peace, union, harmony, and calmness away from the uncertainties of this world towards certainty of the Divine, towards our meditations, prayers, and recitations, we will miss the life-fulfilling opportunity, we will miss the purpose of life: to discover the wonderful and exhilarating

experience that comes from the Divine will over our own will. None of us can avoid the final moment when we *must* accept the Divine will over our own, but we can choose to accept it before the end.

“Wa qaala Ta’allaa, ‘Qul inna-l-mawta-lladhee tafirruunna minhu fa’innahu mulaaqeekum thumma turadduuna ilaa’aalimi-l-ghaybi wa-sh-shahaadat fa-yunabbi’ukum bimaa kuntum ta’maluun”

And He said: “Say: truly death—from which they flee—is assuredly coming to meet you and then you will be brought back to the Knower of the Concealed and the Revealed, and He will tell you all that you have done.” (62:8)

In Qur’an it says:

Kayfa takfuruuna bi-Llaahi wa kuñtum amwaatañ fa-ahyaakum thumma yumeetukum thumma yuhyeekum thumma ilayhi turja’uun

How can you reject Allah, when you were dead and then He gave you life, then He will make you die and then give you life again, then you will be returned to Him? Qur'an, 2:28

In our society, we tend to act as if we will live forever. Selfishness and self-absorption has undermined the inner empire of faith and trust. The result is that people do not believe that freedom lies in identifying with a belief and submitting; but instead, they believe freedom lies in *not* identifying with a spiritual framework. People believe that individualism, “I” and “mine,” is the criteria for happiness. They believe that change means altering the outer not the inner aspect of life/self. Fitting-in is better than intellectual striving; and creativity and freedom are characterized by lack of discipline. The reality of being led by our *shaitan* is that we do not respect, and we are not respected. We do not know the

joy of practice and cooperative ventures, personal responsibility within the context of a whole, let alone the subtlety of change. We are at a crossroads in a time when both belief and rationality are disdained. We may say, “*Alhumdulillah*,” that we are on a spiritual path. But how clear are we on our responsibilities and the duties? How able are we (or am I) to communicate them to each other? The shell is useless unless there is life inside it, gestating, and following the inevitable impulse to emerge and to manifest.

I have been speaking today about our capacity for positive change, but we can also change toward the negative. Any progress we make on the path is by the grace of Allah, and our falls and mistakes are our own. The environment we are in and create for ourselves [can] attract the negative, destroy the character of the person and undermine our *fitrah*. If we create an environment of linearity, separation, fear, passivity, negativity, controlling, and arrogance, then the door is wide open. It begins with our fear of loss or separation, with our doubts and uncertainties. If the *shaitan* succeeds, there are signs to let us know. We become more and more disenchanted with the truth, more and more doubtful of the Divine, more and more disenchanted with one another, more critical and skeptical of the possibilities of the Divine plan, more critical of those we love. We become more arrogant and sure of our self and less sure of our guide and the path. We become less sure of our relationships with our friends and with our own culture, people, and community.

The solution to this type of negative spiral is to put your faith in a process that leads to that leap, whether it is called a quantum leap or a leap of faith. It is the same leap. We must cease to think that we have to persevere with a thing, and realize that perseverance is necessary for its own sake. It is persevering with the guide, persevering with the Prophet (sal), and with others who are committed to the same process. As difficult as it may be for a period of time, we must realize

that we must persevere for only a period of time. It is persevering with the knowledge of our essential nature, a tone we each were born with, which has been our companion to this moment from our earliest childhood, and which is the source of our inspiration and the core of our yearning. Using the tools of Islam is using the tools of our essential self: discipline, accuracy, beautiful work, thinking through the tasks before us, being humble and quiet in our inner and outer, tolerant, respectful of others, just in our decisions, seeking quality and orderliness in our lives and in the world around us, and acting without haste.

When asked of the deeds of the Prophet (sal), Aisha said, “*His work was continuous and stable,*” and that the household of the Prophet (sal) did things with study and thorough examination, with proper preparation and trust in Allah. We are all familiar with the famous *hadith* that goes as follows:

One of the companions asked the Prophet (saws), “Messenger of Allah! I go to the forest on my camel. When the time of prayer approaches, should I tether the animal or leave it to itself? The Prophet (saws) said: “Tie its legs with a rope and trust in Allah.”

All work must be done with consideration, completely and thoroughly. Our personalities and characters must undergo change from the root if there is to be hope for this world, hope for our families and community, if you have been chosen, and you have accepted to participate in this change. We know the “you” that was chosen is at the core of you. If it was the “you” at the core of your being that accepted, then your word is your bond.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I return again to the quote about change:

...inna-Llaaha laa yughayyiru maa biqawmin hattaa yughayyiruu maa bi'añfusihim ...

...Verily, never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.... Qur'an 13:11

The Prophet (sal) built an *ummah*/community that was a monument to the capacity of the human being for change, even (as I mentioned in the beginning) for his enemies to change, by starting from the hearts of the people and helping them to transform their imperfect characteristics into humility and awe of Allah, by making people's hearts tremor and their eyes cry when the words of Allah were recited, and by making people so sensitive to piety and prosperity that within a very short span of time they opened their hearts and minds to the world of Islam and opened the hearts of millions of people in the world to Islam. He changed people from arrogance to humility, from selfishness to submission, and from ignorance to awareness.

The world of Islam, of Tasawwuf, of spiritual truth is a world not of do's and don'ts, and rights and wrongs. It's not a world of inexactness; but, rather, it is a world of beautiful concepts and motivations and successes. It is a dynamic world based on acquisition of knowledge, softening of the heart, awareness of the Divine Presence, service, justice, and responsiveness, a life of change—change that comes from Allah (Swt), beginning within our self, initiated by our intentions, choices and actions, but fulfilled only by Allah's grace and mercy. It is not a matter of how enveloping the *hijab* is or how long the beard is. It is a world where there is dialogue and prosperity, where efforts bring fruit; but the deep concern lies with the effort, not the fruit. It is a world of piety and prayer, a world where wisdom/*hikma*) comes from *tazkiyaa*/purification. Only when we center, and

really permit our lives to focus on the spiritual, social, economic and personal well being (both as individuals and as community) will our message really take deep root. We have to earn the *ijazah* of being Sufis and Muslims in community by persevering for change on the *Sair ul Suluk*.

Wa Llahu lahu ul-haqqi wa huwa yahdis-sabil.

Hasbuna Llahu wahdahu wa ni'mal-wakil.

**Wa salli 'ala sayyidina Muhammadin wa ahli wa sahbihi ajma'in
wal-hamdu li-Llahi rabb il-'alamin.**

Truth belongs to Allah; it is He who shows the way.

Allah, alone, suffices us, and what a fine guardian is He!

Blessings upon our Master Muhammad

and his family and companions altogether

and praise is due to Allah, Lord of the Worlds.

Allahumma a'innaa 'alaa dhikrika wa shookrika wa hoosin 'ibaadatika.

O Allah! Help us to remember You, to be grateful to You,

and to worship You in the best way.

Asalaamu aleikum.wa Rahmatullahe wa Barakatuhu.