

## “WHERE ARE WE GOING?”

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by

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*Bismillah ar Rahman ir Raheem*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Asalaam alaykum wa Rahmatullahe wa Barakatuhu!*

The question: **Fa ‘ayna tadh-habun? “So where are you going?” (81:26)** is posed to us in the Qur’an. In my talk today, I submit to you that before we can answer the question of “Where are we going?” we must be comfortable, or at least on the path to understanding why we are here, who we are, and where “here” is. These questions have engaged the minds and the hearts of philosophers and poets, mystics and seeking individuals for centuries. Today we will, *insh’Allah*, at least open the subject of why we are here, and who we must be to be successful on the journey through life as a seeker of Truth ...a seer of Reality. From that we can begin to infer ‘where we are going’.

On a day-to-day basis, most of us avoid thinking of this existence as limited and transient. Instead, we plan where we are going *vis a vis* career, or personal interest or attraction, or the need for financial or material security. The real challenge is to realize that where you are going has to do with who you are, where you are in the moment (the here and now). When we realize the ever-present reality, the Divine presence, our understanding of “where we are” changes.

**Wa li-Llaahi-l-mashriqu wa-l-maghribu fa-aynamaa tuwalluu fa-  
thamma wa j<sup>ah</sup>-Llaahi inna-Llaaha wa asi<sup>c</sup>un <sup>c</sup>aleem.**

**“And to Allah belong the East and the West. And in whichever direction you turn, there is the Presence of Allah. Truly Allah is Vast, All Knowing.” [2:115]**

Through moving back into the state of grace and awareness of the Presence of Allah, we will come to a place where the concept of wanting anything else, going anywhere other than where we are becomes incongruous. Another way of saying this would be that, as our realization of self, time, and place become clear from within, our external choices and opportunities align with our state *and support that state until it becomes permanent (a maqam)*.

### **RETURNING TO FITRAH THROUGH CONSCIOUS CHOICE**

The question “Where are you going?” implies an element of consciousness and choice when it is phrased as: “Are you aware of where you are going? Are you aware of who you are on that journey?” Prophetic wisdom and divine revelation tell us that we are born with certain characteristics (*fitrah*) and in a state of grace. **“Every child is born in *fitrah* then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a Magian.”** (Bukhari). In a spiritual sense, this life is the opportunity to choose a path that takes us on a journey back to that state of grace. Following in the footsteps of Adam and Hawa, life offers us a consciousness and conscience in the application of our unique capability for choice, so that we may find our way through the veils of deception and the pollution of physical life, back to a state of grace/*na’maa*. We are given a means of return, through inner affirmation and change, assumption of responsibility in this world, and by embracing the pathway to a state of inner awakening and “in- sight.” We are given the tools to effectively affect our environment and our fellow human beings.

To see through the pollution of this life and return to our *fitrah*, we must mine the goodness that is seeded in our souls. We must learn to see and hear with

new eyes and ears, taking the opportunities that life brings us to refine our vision, our thoughts, our actions and our associations with Allah, as Allah's divine attributes and qualities manifest throughout creation. In each moment we have the choice to make each decision based on understanding who we are at the core of our being and why we are here. Accomplishing this level of awareness requires both guidance and example, a willingness to be grateful and humble, while being curious and [while] seeking endless and boundless knowledge, learning to live in a boundless and dynamic universe. **“Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave”**(Hadith).

Allah has placed humankind--you and me-- at the center of this Creation...and given us a vehicle for transformation.

**LAQADa KhALAQaNA-L-INSANA FII AHSANI TAQaWIM.**

**“Truly We created the human being in the best form.” 95:4**

That vehicle is “consciousness,” consciousness that is based on choice, which reflects an apparent duality in nature: light and darkness, good and evil, sleep and wakefulness. But this apparent duality is in fact an affirmation of the need for harmony and interdependency in our world, as well as an affirmation of the need for private contemplation and personal effort.

As each of us contemplates the choices in life, large and small, it is important to keep perspective, to keep in mind who we are and to make our choices from that place of strength, the strength of knowing what we believe, the strength of Islam and Tasawwuf. The paradigm of Islam grants to each generation both a “faith-full” and trusting adherence to guidelines that are ancient and proven, as well as analytical tools of *ijtihad* to address current problems and challenges in a personally and culturally relevant way.

As we discover who we are in essence and in creation, why we are here on this journey of awakening and gathering and applying knowledge, we gain the confidence in decision making. Decisions about where we are going are no longer agonizing and difficult, but come naturally and normally as a consequence of this awareness. We have been given the ability to gain knowledge and a conscience to ameliorate the ego and guide the mind, heart, and soul in choices. These qualities have been given to us, along with the *deen*, which point to a universe of inter-related signs and symbols, and create safety and security in ourselves and in the *ummah*.

### **CHOOSING CONTENMENT IN A BIPOLAR WORLD**

Sometimes in life we are confused by a feeling of too many or too few choices; we want to know what it all means. What we must learn is that “it” only means something as you begin to know who you are. Once we know that, we can bring to the moment, to the place where we are, the fullness of our intention, abilities and effort; we become free. That is why the really great people in this world are content with who they are and where they are. Like digging the well in one place and finding water, instead of repeatedly digging new holes and never finding water, if we mine the here and now, instead of looking elsewhere, we can find contentment. Persevere until the perseverance bears fruit.

How do we find contentment in the here and now? By allowing love, humility and gratitude to govern our life. By shedding the negative aspects of the cultural, materialistic value system that we were raised with, and not allowing the environment or judgment of others to dictate the measures of our worth. This is not an easy task in a world that is always judging our abilities. We live in a duplicitous and corrupt environment that has an insidious way of making us look at ourselves on its terms, and then judge others in those terms. [*Shaykh tells the*

*story of well water]* The tendency of this environment (and its inhabitants) is to encourage and reward those who drink the well water.

Just like the world we live in, Allah created us with polarities. We can look at something this way or that way, see it as a positive or negative. In that sense, we are truly bipolar. Our society is bipolar in the literal sense of “having two distinctive and opposite opinions,” and unfortunately also often in the psychiatric sense of alternation between mania and depression. But this confusion is just a manifestation of the lie that somehow our dominant or distorted desires have to be materialized, experienced, in order for us to be real, accepted, recognized, appreciated or even loved.

Unfortunately, too many measure their self-worth by the material / physical standards of *others*, looking for acceptance from some *other* person or persons who do not have the same standards or values and who do not have faith in Allah (Swt). If one follows this pattern there is no end to looking outside our self to find who we are. Just like there is no end to desires; there is no end to corruption; there is no end to selfishness. If we look externally to define ourselves, we will eventually allow our self to identify with the sickness and corruption of the external. When we submit and let others define us and even defile us, we cede control of where we are going. That path is one of lifelong unhappiness and struggle, discontent with where we are, and failures on the path. It is embracing the negative worldview that drags one down and also everyone around you. If you are a nasty employer, you make all your employees miserable. You are a nasty employee, and make your fellow workers miserable. You are a possessive, acquisitive parent, and you make your children exactly that way. If you are an addict, you hang out with addicts. Whatever your addiction is you become a victim of the external.

**WA ‘IdhA TWALLA SA’A FI-L ‘ARDI LI-YUFSIDA FIHA WA YUHLIKA-L-HARTHA WA-N-NASL; WA-LLAHU LA YUHIBBU-L-FASADa.**

**“And when he turns his back [on you], he hastens to spread corruption on the earth and to ruin crops and lineage. And Allah does not love corruption.” (2:205)**

Don’t let people who don’t understand or don’t appreciate you, who are threatened by you, who have no compassion and love in their hearts for you, who will not sacrifice for you or be patient with you—don’t let them define your life. Struggle against them by affirming that you are the definer of your own life, that you frame your own life in love, compassion, and Islam (submission to Allah)—where you find ultimate safety and security. Believe that love takes care of all things. Love is like a universal solvent. We all know that love really does change our mind-set, our point-of-view. It changes us. When that love is imbued with faith, humility and gratitude, when that love is trusting and trustworthy, the change is deep and permanent, filled with and reflecting the light of Allah (Swt), the grace of Allah (Swt).

Each day we must consciously choose the positive side, live our life out of love, turn our attention to gratitude, and humbly accept the love of those who love us for who we are, for what we can be even, if we do not see it clearly. Even at the most basic level, choosing positivity breeds the positive; happiness causes happiness in others; a smiling face causes a smiling face in return. If we stop fearing failure we can move step by step toward appreciating our self and those who truly appreciate us. When we stop defining ourselves by someone else’s definition, we find worlds of contentment in the here and now with our self and those around us. This is the journey toward our *fitrah*. This is the journey of

*Hazari, Nazari, Shazuli, Ma'i.* The journey of heart to heart, love and trust from our soul to our self.

When you are discontent and tempted by desires, you are cheating yourself out of you own happiness by your own negativity and fear. Temptation is a part of life. But if we know about ourselves, that we give into temptation, let it be to the temptation to be positive, to be happy and content. Let us be tempted to be the best husband, the best daughter, the best wife, the best friend, and the best *mureed/mureeda*. Every time we make a positive choice, we are going toward Allah, (the Divine attributes); we are building our strength. We are empowered by our choices, our daily commitment to our path, to our Shaykh, to the Prophet (sal), and to Allah (Swt).

What does it mean to speak with contentment, live with contentment, act with contentment? Some of us have spent 30, 40 years of our lives to get to a place where we can appreciate the enormity, beauty, and fantastic blessing of what we have. When we are aware of that blessing, we see the inter-relatedness of all Allah's creation; we affirm and practice inclusivity, not exclusivity. We affirm and practice gratitude as we look at the complexity of the universe outwardly and in our own being. A natural attitude or feeling of humility settles in our being and we begin to identify much easier with the way of the Prophet Muhammad (sal).

### **HOW DO WE GET THERE? BY THE GRACE OF ALLAH**

So, where are we going? *Insh'allah*, via our conscious choices, we are weaving our way through the corruption of this world on a path back to our *fitrah*, toward contentment, toward awareness of the Divine. But ultimately, we must make our effort and put our faith in Allah that we are going the right way; it is only by the grace of Allah that we will return to His Grace.

Surely we know that the rewards of this life don't last. We get money; we spend the money. We get attention; the attention wanes. We are hungry and get food, and then get hungry again. We have physical desires; they are satisfied and gone, and then they rise again. We assume that if we take certain actions, we will get reward for them. So we expect that Allah's gifts are going to be doled out according to the same plan, that we can control Allah's gifts to us. But grace does not work that way. The *na'maa* of Allah (Swt) teaches us to let go and let Allah do what Allah does, to trust in Allah. Because not only are we *not* in charge, we don't have to be. Let it be. Don't worry about the ones who don't get it, who don't understand. We just need to stay open to receiving that *na'maa* of Allah, the beauty of Allah.

To be receptive to the grace of Allah, you have to give up the persistent feeling that you are unworthy. You have to give up the feeling that you don't deserve what you have, that you are not as good as someone else, that you are not as good as people think you are. You have to give up the idea that you are "messed up," or that your life up to this point, or your whole life (depending on how old you are) was some kind of an arbitrary natural phenomenon. Insofar as you may feel you have committed sins and errors of judgment, harmed yourself or others, you must embrace repentance and affirm your willingness and spiritual intention to change; to come back to the comfort of your initial *fitrah*. And though at times you may feel shame and humiliation, regret and embarrassment, you have to give up being ashamed, and embrace your heart's ability to return to a state of grace and harmony.

The litany of self-demeaning, of materiality, of acquisitiveness, of unworthiness, of arrogance, of self-destruction is totally dissonant in the ears of *Al Rahmat*. When you are able to give those up, when you are in resonance with the *Rahmat* of Allah (Swt), compassion and mercy just flow to you. The past is gone;



you are creating the future in the most positive sense. Where you are going is where you are, in the embrace of the *Rahmat* of Allah (Swt). Where are you going? What I am trying to convey today is that you can choose a journey that takes you more and more in that love, into the *Rahmat* of Allah. That is real love, the love that you plant your garden with, or that guides you to takes care of the animals, of creation, the love you watch over children and care for the elderly with, the love you have for one another. You can choose to say: “I am going wherever that love takes me.” Real love will not take you anywhere destructive or meaningless. While the negative attraction that masquerades as love is not love but is selfish and demanding, materialistic, desire-ridden, fearful, and insecure, real love keeps you in the state of gratitude and inner peace that is a prelude to paradise.

## **CONCLUSION: PRACTICAL TOOLS**

I have spoken somewhat esoterically on the importance of love, of remembering and knowing who you are in the polluted environment we live in. But I would like to end today with some practical advice in the form of a reminder of perspective and some guidelines from Qur’an and Hadith on who we should strive to be.

### **Perspective**

As we go into the next stages of our lives, I cannot emphasize enough the benefit of this measured approach to life. At each stage we come closer to the longer transitions. As you contemplate “where you are going,” I offer you some perspective in the knowledge that each stage of life has it’s roles and responsibility: from 0-6 years we are learning language and refining our motor activity; from 6-9 the basics of values and right and wrong are being formed; from 9-12 we are testing these values; from 12-15 making these values and ideas our

foundation; from 16-25-30 we are learning how to turn inward to find balance with the outer world, as well as gathering knowledge for action; and from 30-70 application, service to society and preparing the next generation, contemplating other dimensions, asking critical questions and finding inner peace; 70-120 exemplifying that entire [ ] one knows and [has] learned, preparing to return to being a part of the *ayah* of Allah.

I realize the practical issues of daily life often press on us. But we have to have the discipline to attend to ourselves first. To be trusted, first one has to become truly trustworthy; to get married one has to make themselves marriageable, etc

Nothing replaces the foundational principles of Islam, the principle of humanities utmost capabilities and possibilities in creating the individual character that attracts goodness and courage, strength and insight, confidence and humility to you. I always say...if it doesn't feel right, it isn't all right. Don't talk yourselves into what you desire unless what you desire is consistent with all your values and all your sense of right and is affirmed in the tests of life, conversation, observation, and time, more time than you usually wish to spend.

### **Guidelines from Qur'an**

In contemplating for your own answers to the questions: "who am I?" and "where am I going?" I encourage you to return to the guidance of Qur'an and Hadith. If we read the Qur'an and Hadith with the eye to understanding why we are here and how we are to act, then we will receive the very best means to make our choices. If we realize and embrace how to speak, how to act, how to be aware of what is truth and what is false, how to serve, how to be good kin, neighbors, husbands and wives, then what we choose will be from what is placed before us...and what is placed before us will be good choices. If you feel comfortable in

an environment of service, kindness, and goodness, then your choices will be pure and supportive and positive.

*So who are you?*

- You are the best of Allah’s creation. **LAQADa KhALAQaNA-L-INSANA FII AHSANI TAQaWIM.** “Truly We created the human being in the best form.” 95:4
- “Every child is born in *fitrah* then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a Magian.” (Bukhari)
- “A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand the Muslims are safe, and a believer is one in whom people place their trust in regard to their life and wealth.” (Hadith).

*How are we to act:*

- He is not a man of faith who sleeps with a full stomach while his neighbor is hungry (Hadith).
- By One in Whose hand stands my life, nobody truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself. (Hadith).
- May Allah be kind to a person of gentle dealings, when he sells, when he purchases, and when he gives decisions. (Hadith)
- ...Give, therefore, full measure and weight [in all your dealings], and do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs; and do not spread corruption on the earth after it has been so well ordered: [all] this is for your own good, if you would but believe. (Qur’an 7:83).
- ...wa-Llaahu yuhibbu-s-saabireen  
...God loves those who are patient. (Qur’an 3:146)

- **Fa-ṣbir kamaa ṣabara uluu al<sup>ḥ</sup>azmi mina-r-rusuli wa laa tasta<sup>ḥ</sup>jil lahum kaannahum yawma yarawna maa yuu<sup>ḥ</sup>aduuna lam yalbathuu illaa saa<sup>ḥ</sup>atam-min nahaarim balaaghuñ fa-hal yuhlaku illaa-l-qawmu-l-faasiqun**

**...Remain then, patient in adversity, just as all of the apostles, endowed with firmness of heart, bore themselves with patience. Bear up with patience and do not seek to hasten for those [who are bent on denying the truth] their doom (Qur'an 46:35).**

- **Make things easy for the people, do not make it difficult for them, and make them calm (with glad tidings) and do not repulse them. (Hadith)**

### **CLOSING**

Allah clearly spells out for us in the Qu'ran who we should strive to be and where we are going:

**FA-MAA 'UTITUM-MIN ShAY'IN FA-MATA 'U-L-HAYATI-D-DUNYA: WA MA 'INDA-LLAHI KhAYRUNW-WA 'AbaQA LI-L-LADhINA 'AMANU WA 'ALA RABBIHIM YATAWAKKALUN.**

**And [remember] that anything you have been given is but a passing comfort in the life of this world, and that which is with Allah is better and more enduring, for those who believe and who place their trust in their Lord. 42:36**

**WA-L-LADhINA YAJaTANIBUNA KABAA 'IRA-L-IthMI WA-L-FAWAHIShA WA 'IdhA MA GhADIBU HUM YAGhFIRUN.  
WA-L-LADhINA-S-TAJABU LI-RABBIHIM WA'AQAMU-SALAH;  
WA'AMRUHUM ShURA BAYNAHUM; WA MIMMA  
RAZAQaNAHUM YUNFIQUN.**

**And those avoid the major wrongdoings and shameful deeds and, when they are angry, forgive.**

**And those who answer the call of their Lord and establish the salah, and whose affair [is decided] by consultation between them[selves], and those who spend [on the deserving] from that which We have provided them. 42: 37-38**

### **CLOSING DUA**

*Allahumma salle ala sayeddina Muhammed al fatih oghliq wa-al Hatim limaa-sabaq naser al haqq bil haqq wa-al haadi ila siratiqa-l-mustaqeem, wa ala alehi wa sahbehi haqq qadrihi wa miqdarihi al adheem.*

*O Allah, shower your blessings upon our master Muhammad, the opener of what has been closed and the seal of what has passed, the champion of truth by the Truth, and the guide to Your straight path, and (on) his family and his companions with the equivalent to the greatness due to his exalted status.*

### **[Optional Resource]**

Narrated Aisha (the wife of the Prophet):

I never remembered my parents believing in any religion other than the true religion (i.e. Islam), and (I don't remember) a single day passing without our being visited by Allah's Apostle in the morning and in the evening. When the Muslims were put to test (i.e. troubled by the pagans), Abu Bakr set out migrating to the land of Ethiopia, and when he reached Bark-al-Ghimad, Ibn Ad-Daghina, the chief of the tribe of Qara, met him and said, "O Abu Bakr! Where are you going?" Abu Bakr replied, "My people have turned me out (of my country), so I want to wander on the earth and worship my Lord." Ibn Ad-Daghina said, "O Abu Bakr! A man like you should not leave his home-land, nor should he be driven out, because you help the destitute, earn their livings, and you keep good relations with your kith and kin, help the weak and poor, entertain guests generously, and help the calamity-stricken persons. Therefore I am your protector. Go back and worship your Lord in your town."

So Abu Bakr returned and Ibn Ad-Daghina accompanied him. In the evening Ibn Ad-Daghina visited the nobles of Quraish and said to them, "A man like Abu Bakr

should not leave his homeland, nor should he be driven out. Do you (i.e. Quraish) drive out a man who helps the destitute, earns their living, keeps good relations with his kith and kin, helps the weak and poor, entertains guests generously and helps the calamity-stricken persons?" So the people of Quraish could not refuse Ibn Ad-Daghina's protection, and they said to Ibn Ad-Daghina, "Let Abu Bakr worship his Lord in his house. He can pray and recite there whatever he likes, but he should not hurt us with it, and should not do it publicly, because we are afraid that he may affect our women and children." Ibn Ad-Daghina told Abu Bakr of all that. Abu Bakr stayed in that state, worshipping his Lord in his house. He did not pray publicly, nor did he recite Qur'an outside his house.

Then a thought occurred to Abu Bakr to build a mosque in front of his house, and there he used to pray and recite the Qur'an. The women and children of the pagans began to gather around him in great number. They used to wonder at him and look at him. Abu Bakr was a man who used to weep too much, and he could not help weeping on reciting the Qur'an. That situation scared the nobles of the pagans of Quraish, so they sent for Ibn Ad-Daghina. When he came to them, they said, "We accepted your protection of Abu Bakr on condition that he should worship his Lord in his house, but he has violated the conditions and he has built a mosque in front of his house where he prays and recites the Qur'an publicly. We are now afraid that he may affect our women and children unfavorably. So, prevent him from that. If he likes to confine the worship of his Lord to his house, he may do so; but if he insists on doing that openly, ask him to release you from your obligation to protect him. We dislike to break our pact with you, but we deny Abu Bakr the right to announce his act publicly." Ibn Ad-Daghina went to Abu- Bakr and said, ("O Abu Bakr!) You know well what contract I have made on your behalf; now, you are either to abide by it, or else release me from my obligation of protecting you, because I do not want the Arabs to hear that my people have dishonored a contract I have made on behalf of another man." Abu Bakr replied, "I release you from your pact to protect me, and am pleased with the protection from Allah."

At that time the Prophet was in Mecca, and he said to the Muslims, "In a dream I have been shown your migration place, a land of date palm trees, between two mountains, the two stony tracts." So, some people migrated to Medina, and most of those people who had previously migrated to the land of Ethiopia, returned to Medina. Abu Bakr also prepared to leave for Medina, but Allah's Apostle said to him, "Wait for a while, because I hope that I will be allowed to migrate also." Abu Bakr said, "Do you indeed expect this? Let my father be sacrificed for you!" The Prophet said, "Yes." So Abu Bakr did not migrate for the sake of Allah's Apostle in order to accompany him. He fed two she-camels he possessed with the leaves of As-Samur tree that fell on being struck by a stick

for four months.

One day, while we were sitting in Abu Bakr's house at noon, someone said to Abu Bakr, "This is Allah's Apostle with his head covered coming at a time at which he never used to visit us before." Abu Bakr said, "May my parents be sacrificed for him. By Allah, he has not come at this hour except for a great necessity." So Allah's Apostle came and asked permission to enter, and he was allowed to enter. When he entered, he said to Abu Bakr. "Tell everyone who is present with you to go away." Abu Bakr replied, "There are none but your family. May my father be sacrificed for you, O Allah's Apostle!" The Prophet said, "I have been given permission to migrate." Abu Bakr said, "Shall I accompany you? May my father be sacrificed for you, O Allah's Apostle!" Allah's Apostle said, "Yes." Abu Bakr said, "O Allah's Apostle! May my father be sacrificed for you, take one of these two she-camels of mine." Allah's Apostle replied, "(I will accept it) with payment."