

September 14, 2008

Sunday

Title: Fine-Tuning During Ramadan

DVD title: Seizing the Moment: Time and Time Again
Part II

Asalaamu aleikum. (Duas). *Insh'allah*, everyone is happy and content, fulfilled. I'm rested, because I set my clock for 4:45 pm.

I'm going to try today to bring some things together in terms of the concept of *taskhīr*. It comes from *sakhara*, which means to bring something into service. In Qur'an, the subtlety of these quotations takes a lot of concentration and contemplation. Allah Swt says in Qur'an in Suratu Ibrahim: **"It is Allah Who created the heavens and the earth and sent down rain from the heavens and thereby produced from the fruits, provisions for you. And Who placed the ships under your control so they may sail through the sea by His command. Who has made rivers to be of service to you. And He made the sun and the moon in their constancy to be of service to you, and the night and the day in service to you."**

You find similar references in Suratu-l-Nahl, v.11-14, **"Where He causes the crops to grow for you, and olive trees and dates and grapes and all other fruits. Surely this is a sign for those who think."** Again, you can find [similar] references in Suratu-l-Jāthiya, 45:12-13. And it goes on. Allah Swt talks about how all this is made of service to us. Razi, Nuri and others have commented on this in great detail. Indeed, a lot of modern Islamic scientists are looking at this, and I quote it when I am talking about systems in Islam, not only just what is integrated into repetitive systems in Islam, but the

subtleties of it. One of the discussions around this subject is a discussion of when Allah makes something of service to us, for our benefit. If you look in Hans Wher [Arabic dictionary], when you get to *taskhīr*, it says subservient. But it doesn't mean we can abuse any of the things Allah Swt made subservient to us. Allah Swt makes them subservient to us to provide us with exactly what He is telling us He is providing for us, but not for us to make subservient.

In the classical dictionary there are interesting concepts. I only want to touch on them before I talk about Ramadān and these concepts, so you can get a context to it in your minds. *Sakharu taskhirān* is clarified in the classical sense as “to charge someone with a task without remuneration.” There is a real subtlety in this. Allah has made this all subservient to us, and yet at the same time, [in this classical sense it says,] “To charge someone or something with a task, not of your own accord, but to compel him to do it.” In this sense, anything that submits to you and obeys you or is ready for you has been made subservient to you. This opens up the whole subject of what Allah has compelled to be compelled to be subservient to us, and our relationship with it and our *adab* toward it, our responsibility toward it.

In certain terms, *taskhīr* has come to mean this concept of fine-tuning, refining our understanding of our relationship to Allah Swt and all that Allah Swt has put in our hands, made subservient to us. In terms of the systems approach, I talk about it as visualizing the human being at the axial point between the outer and the inner. All this has been created for us and made subservient to us, and we have been given responsibility for it. That means [we have been given] the ability to respond properly to it. If we have been given responsibility, it means inherently we have the ability to respond properly to it, with proper *adab*, with proper humility/*kushū*, awe and love and respect. Then we have to look, not just at all the natural things Allah has made subservient to us in the physical,

but there is another subtle part to this *taskhīr*, which are the emotional and psychological aspects, and our responsibility in our interrelationships with other human beings.

All this is much too big for one hour talk. I've talked about it, and you can listen to it and read it. I'm encouraging you this weekend to open the Qur'an and look at the Qur'an in different ways. Have you noticed that? Yes. Sometimes we get into reading something over and over again always in the same way. One day, we say, "Gee, I saw something new today." Why not go to it with the idea of seeing something new? Why not go to is predisposed to look for something? Yesterday we talked about *waqt* and *zaman*. You can look at it in terms of *qabd* and *bast*. And you can look at it in terms of this *taskhīr*. But even with what little I know, there are endless treasures, even with the dictionary in your hand or the lexicon. Anyone can teach themselves to look at the letters and find it in the lexicon.

What I want to do is try to help all of us to stay in harmony with this month, to be in resonance with this month. That means we have to think of ourselves as musicians. We can come to the instrument with the mode in mind, but we still have to start off all the same way. We have to tune the instrument, because life gets you out of tune, the humidity, the temperature. Even on a brass instrument, the placement of the mouthpiece [is important for tuning]. You can't name an instrument that doesn't get out of tune, and we are an instrument. Allah Swt has created us with all the potential of every sound and possibility and *maqam* and *dastgah*. Every possible mode you can think of is inherently in us, and we have to learn how to tune this instrument.

We can make metaphor after metaphor, ie. about the nervous system, the neural synapses and how that happens and how it works, and what happens when it is disrupted.

Nonetheless, what we are talking about socially, morally, ethically, spiritually, internally,

externally, physically, politically is the sense of the constant search for harmony, *mizan*/balance. This is the month of harmonization or resonance. Part of being successful in that, as any musician will tell you, is to take yourself out of the picture in a way, to become open to the potentialities; or, as we say in the scientific world, to live in the realm of possibilities, not probabilities, to move into the non-linear world of infinite possibilities. That's something we can train ourselves to in this month of Ramadān.

As I said yesterday, you have these two events in the Islamic year, Ramadān and Hajj, where things are very ordered and many different possibilities can exist and happen. This is an opportunity to remove from ourselves selfishness and selfness in the negative sense. It's not so much *mujahadah*, where you are struggling with the *nafs ammāra*, but more like you are striving to see the moon on Ramadān—the anxiety and anxiousness to go and look and see. What Allah is revealing to you, you have no control over. Allah is saying, “Look in the sky and understand the rotation and revelation, and how the moon follows the sun. Look, here is a sign to you, a pronouncement to you.” We want to be aware and attentive in this month, not to look at the struggle of Ramadān in the sense of a negative struggle.

We have spoken about it so many times. But think of it in terms of “**inna ma'al usri yusra.**” You know there is ease that is coming along with that hardship. Not only did Allah swt tell us that, but He told us that twice in a row. He emphasizes it. You say to someone, “Pay attention to what I'm saying. I really need you to pay attention”—emphasized. We have to be assured that this ease comes in many different ways. We can discover it in the ease of our *ibāda*, in the ease of our *tarawīh*. We make *isha*, *tarawīh*, *salat ul tasbīh*. My knees are bad: I go in and out of remembering that, in and out of the pain. But at the end of that we made a beautiful *dhikr*. The same legs were standing still and moving in another way. Where did the struggle and pain go? Allah says, “**If you**

persevere, I'm going to assist you. Inallaha ma'a saberin." And the reward came in the *dhikr*. What was the reward of the *dhikr*? If it was only the fact that we were standing together, moving together in harmony and resonance, what an incredible reward was that—just to be together in *jamat*! Then we have so many hundreds of millions of people we are together with in this Ramadān. And we get focused on ourselves, and forget about everyone else, even here in the *khanaqah*/community where we are bumping into each other all the time. [It is] not like you are out there, working in a job, and 99% of the people you are working with are non-Muslims. The only contact you have with another Muslim is when you come home at night, maybe. Or you may be blessed like Amina and you work with Muslims all day, even then we forget. We get in the way of ourselves.

The disease comes in many different ways, and discovering the ease of the *tarawīh* or *salat ul tasbīh* might not be in the physical ease of it, but the release Allah gives us. The ease comes from how easy it is for us in a state of reflection, of *muhasabat*, to turn our attention away from ourselves. We sit with the Qur'an, we forget about things that are bothering us. We sit in *muraqabah*, things pass. Even when we are making *muhasabat*, we see the release of the day's events, in this context. We have a very clear choice; either our fast is going to make us focus almost exclusively on our self, on our state of health or mind; or it is going to be an opening for us, an opportunity for us to seize.

As people of Tasawwuf, we were taught to seize that moment that we talked about yesterday, to seize the *waqt*. How do you seize something that is passing? It's like a tautology. How do you seize something that is passing? That's why it is an opening, but not in *zaman*. There's an internal opening, a state of knowing. The more repetition of that state that you have, the more it becomes your default. That *maqam* is established. Just like in the music, you have a *maqam* that is established, but you have infinite possibilities of improvisation around it. There is a dimensionality to it, potentiality to it. As you are

passing through the time, you seize the moment of realization and peace. You seize the moment of euphoric spiritual awakening, and that opens up other realms of possibilities and time for us. We don't have to worry so much about the philosophy of it, but it's there. Just to be able to recognize those moments. In that sense, Ramadān is a month of moments. Ramadān is a month of fine-tuning.

Again, that's why we are not fasting for ourselves, but our self gets in the way. We feel better when we complete the day of a fast and we know we had a good day, but it is *fi sabīlillah*. It is the means through which we are remembering all these benefits and all these wonderful treasures that have been placed before us. Focus on harmony, compassion, love, patience, perseverance, and tolerance, on justice, on being non-critical and uplifting others with our words, and reduce our distractions; be moderate and find that resonance, find the ability to refine the ability to fine-tune. As I said yesterday, we have to be relatively tuned to be fine-tuned. If you have two strings, you can tell whether they are in tune, and as you add a number of strings to it, the level of complexity increases. With that focus on the general principles and qualities and attitudes, every day what I encourage is to take some thing, in your own mind, privately—we have the little *du'ā* book, and that's wonderful. It gives us a hint of what I want to concentrate on today—take one thing in your own heart and own mind, and bring it back to yourself throughout the day.

Many of you have heard me tell the story before of when I was a young man. I was working on the 23rd floor of Gateway Four in Pittsburgh in the advertising business, learning how to refine my ability to prevaricate. I had my spiritual teachings on cards – I still have them in my desk. I would read them and have an idea what I wanted to keep in my mind. The challenge was, could I get from my car to my office on the 23rd floor and still remember it, which includes people getting in the elevator and saying good morning

and, and saying good morning to the receptionist at the desk and all that. (I was brought up to say good morning to people.) I can't tell you how many times I failed. I'd arrive at my desk, even with the cards in my hands. People would ask me what I was reading. "Just some notes," I'd say. And I would fail. In that recognition of failure was also a form of *dhikr*. It reminded me of what I had failed.

One of the aspects of not appreciating the treasures Allah Swt has placed before us is to become so self-indulgent that we only castigate ourselves and we punish ourselves. We forget that we couldn't do that unless we were remembering what we were punishing ourselves for. This is a form of *ibāda*, a form of *dhikr*. We just have to take that next little step and remember that. The theory – to me it's a reality – is that all of it is noted. And it is not noted just out of fear of hell or not, but in the sense that it re-casts our character. That's what the Prophet(sal) said he came to do. It recasts our character and refines us.

Every time we reflect on what is good, every time we articulate what is right and what is good, every time we affirm, even by seeing the error and recognizing the mistake, even by castigating ourselves for something that was in our minds, or that came off our tongue that shouldn't have, this is counted to recast our character. This is not complicated, but we don't think of it, and thinking of it is very important. Thinking of it, reflecting upon it, *tafakkur* is a very integral part of a spiritual life. It is part of the fine-tuning. We have so many ways to do that because Allah Swt has revealed and reflected Himself within ourselves, especially through the *Asmā al Husna*.

How many possibilities for compassion are there in our lives, increased innumerable times just by the news? I'm not encouraging you to listen to the news all day, but in today's news, how many opportunities for compassion are there? How many

opportunities are there for restraint, perseverance, trust? How many things remind you of justice and injustice? How many opportunities are there every day to see the miracles and the beauty (like the programs on the Discovery Channel) or the diversity? All we have to do is link it to our spiritual life, to our self. That, in itself, lifts our *nafs* up: *nafs ammāra*, *nafs lawwama*, up, level by level.

I used to live in a cave in India as an ascetic. The idea in Yoga was to kill the ego. But in Tasawwuf we learn, it is about the evolution of the self, how it evolves. That is again, change in the potentiality, the potential for change. How many times a day do we hold ourselves back from change, by our opinion of ourselves or someone else? The restrictions we placed on ourselves are the restrictions we placed on someone else. We have to trust in Allah that Allah is guiding us, and the other person, whom we care about, whom we love. It's not that Allah Swt is saying, "I'm guiding the person until you take over." He is not telling me that as a *shaykh* or you, as a husband, wife, brother, or sister. Rather, understand that under the aegis of Allah Swt, you may have responsibility for another human being or a situation, but you can't forget there are things you don't know. So you tune yourself to do your task the best you can.

In almost every form of Eastern, Persian, and Arabic music, there is a place for improvisation. You hear it in Arabic music as "Layla, Layla, Layla." What does it mean? Anyone can improvise, but if you are really an accomplished musician, Allah Swt has entrusted you with this *maqam* that you can yourself become part of this creative process. You have a role in the continuing creative reality. Creation didn't happen and then it stopped, and now it's always happening. Allah Swt didn't sit on a throne somewhere with His beard a certain length, and His thobe always a certain length, otherwise He would be punished by who knows what... but Allah Swt is present. When we are creating, that creative presence, that Creator is present within us.

We are in this dialogue with Allah Swt, not as equals, not to argue, but respectfully, to ask the questions and show our ability. You listen to the expertise of the individual and you respond properly to that. Are we responding properly? Ramadān is a month of learning how to respond properly, how to bring out the best in us, not the most fear, anxiety and worry, but the best, healthiest part of us; and Allah will increase our health. This month is for refining and seeing, and also the time for seeing. That's why we have to prepare in Rajab and Shabān. By the time we arrive in Ramadān, we are already in relative tune. Now here we are; half the month is gone, and we haven't fine tuned ourselves enough—most of us, anyway. I can't speak for everybody.

Fine tuning doesn't just mean how serious you are, and you don't talk about anything else but the month of Ramadān, Ramadān Ramadān, but it's the subtlety of how everything is flavored by the month. It's a time for cooking wonderful dishes. We become hypersensitive to the flavors and temperature of the food. We all have to learn how to eat like Shaykh Noorudeen eats, very slowly, appreciating this one thing.

It's also the time for time, reflecting on time. The time we take to do our prayers/*namaz*, our *muraqabah*, *tawajjuh*, *tafakkur*, our *wudu*, our *khidma* to others, like our people are doing for this retreat. We need to know that we are adventurers on the most beautiful adventure. [We are] treasure hunters seeking the most wonderful treasure. The beauty of the treasure is right in front of our faces, and it is within us. Does anyone doubt that? I'm not just trying to say pretty words and be encouraging. Look around, there is all kinds of misery in this world, all kinds of difficult challenges and inequities. But there are no inequities in Allah Swt's creation, what He has created. What we have messed with, there are the inequities. We have to take the passion we have, the passion for life, for one another, for something we believe in, in *dunya*, internally, spiritually. We have to make

them accessible to us.

This treasure is very interesting: it accrues. The more you find, the more there is. It grows. It's like making yogurt, what I call '*bacillus hasana*,' good little creatures. The more you find, the more you collect, the more it grows. As you develop love between one another, the more it grows; respect for one another, the more it grows; love of Qur'an, the more it grows—more, more, more. The more you spend time in the *masjid*, the more you want to. The more you sit in meditation, the more you want to. And there are signs that Allah gives us, to let us know we are on the right track: the breeze of calmness, the breeze of contentment blows across us, the breeze of peace. Then in a challenging sense, we look at things in our life and say, "I'm out of balance. I'm putting too much emphasis on this and not enough on that. I can accomplish what I need to accomplish with half the effort I'm spending. I don't have to verify myself by the amount of pain I'm in, the amount of strain I have, the amount of time I spend on something, or the amount of angst it takes before I do something, the amount of energy I have to put in to convince someone. I have to refine the ways I articulate and do my work."

We find Allah has taught us how to do something else: how to create time. We are still operating in the same *zaman*, but you are creating more moments of reflection and *ibāda*. As more things become *ibāada*, your life becomes timeless in that sense, and hopefully seamless, so when we leave this world, it is a seamless departure into eternity. [We have] to get used to in this world that we are living in an open-ended universe. There are no ends. I don't mean this philosophically. Internally, you start to act and resolve things in the sense that the only things that disturb you are people who are blocking themselves and others, restricting themselves and others, maybe restricting you, too, because we are left with this ego. You actually start to feel this endlessness, endless possibilities. Then every once in a while, you read an article in Scientific American that says, finally they are

getting it. Finally the view of the astrophysicists is getting the infinity and the endlessness. Then you get caught up in the math and close the magazine like I do. That's all manifest in the month of Ramadān.

So many these things have happened during this month—prophets born, revelation of Qur'an, so many things—that you can't fill it with enough things. What day were you born on? May 12th. Are you the only person in the world born on May 12th? Is there enough room for another 20 billion people to be born on May 12th? Maybe not on this planet, but how about 2 million? Of course. There is enough space, because it's not about space. Anybody else here born on May 12th? You're the only person! You can start to think, "I'm the only person," and then you find 20 other people and humility will come to you. There are endless possibilities in the moment, and this is one of the messages of this great month. Don't feel apprehensive if you feel calm; that would be a contradiction in terms. Don't say, "Uh-oh. I'm calm. How long is this going to stay? I'm going to lose my calm. My calm's going to be gone, and then I'm going to be uptight." And when you lose it – because you are going to lose it—you worry, "It's never going to come back. Oh, my God. I'll never be calm again." You have to get out of that kind of linear thinking. These are the *hal* of Allah Swt.

There are many *hals* in Ramadan, many opportunities, many gifts, many treasures. Then, of course, that's again another opportunity to affirm what you believe. What is *ibāda*? Affirmation of belief, subservience, *taskhīr*. Just like Allah has made all these great things under His control, we have to make our self under our control. So Allah gives us these doorways, like the *latā'if* we were talking about. These are the lamps you can light that will cast a new light on other things. We have these five senses that are physical senses, and these ten other senses or more. Put the two of them together – and this is just my thought – when Allah says, "**You have eyes but you don't see,**" it's because you

don't put these senses together with the physical senses. All the signs are in creation, but we are not seeing them, because we need to look through other eyes, through other organs of perception. Another definition of *latā'if* is "organs of perception." When we combine those two, we begin to see. That's, of course, fine-tuning based on subjugating those aspects of our self to the higher realm, to the higher way of thinking, not as a forced subjugation, but as a natural subjugation—things naturally become subservient to you.

How many of you have a cat? Do you know how hard it is to train cats? It's hard. But you can do it. Cats are natural healers, especially white cats, I think. I have trained cats who, when someone is sick, they will climb on the part that is bothering them. You have a backache, the cat will lie on your back, or lie next to you if you are ill. You can train a cat to bring out its healing capabilities. I like to see things in a different way. How do I train the cat? What I want to bring out is what is natural for the cat. I'm sure animal trainers could train the cat to jump through hoops and all kinds of things. They can train fleas to have a flea circus. Think about that mentality.

What I do to train a cat – and this is a deep secret – is to do one thing. Don't meow in the house. Outside, BonBon will meow at you all the time. When he walks in the house, he doesn't meow. If he does, you say, "BonBon!" And he stops. Am I training the cat (not my child) to heel? No. I'm training the cat to stop meowing. But somehow, in the cat consciousness, it allows the cat to be what he naturally is. A little bit of restraint releases from the cat something quite natural. It's the same principle in your own self. We have the same principle in the teachings of the Khwaja Khwajagan. That is, abstinence and restraint for the higher power. Something higher comes about that is already inside of us, but it becomes released. Through training in forms of music, this ability to improvise comes. Through fasting, something greater comes out. You have to learn how to seize that and know what that is, so you can make it part of your cognitive process and choose

it. Realize that every choice that we make comes from no choice. You may not realize that, but it is true.

We have these wonderful pregnant ladies with us. They will give birth to a baby. Unless they are mentally deranged, they have no choice but to feed the baby. They can feed the baby formula or breast feed. There is no choice to feed the baby, but a couple of choices on what to feed the baby. All choices come out of no choice. When you open up this realm, many things happen to you. You have to learn to watch them. You need *zaman*, time, from the new moon at Ramadān to the new moon of Shawwal, and you need to seize the moment. It takes effort. What is naturally inside of you comes out. What Allah Swt has placed inside of us is the reflection (or the shadows) of the attributes of Allah. Then they have to come out at the appropriate time and place.

I talked about articulation yesterday. *Ibāda*, prayer, these things come out, as you are studying, reading Qur'an, doing *wudu*, and as you are serving other human beings. Then they start to come out in the interspaces between those, until that's who you are, until you realize who you are, then you discover that who you are is an endless beingness. There is no end to who you are. There is an end to the form you are in right now, but no end to who we are. The more we do, the better it is.

Shaykh Nooruddeen said last night, if we do the *dhikr*, it will just come naturally right out of the *salat ul tasbīh*. It's a natural progression. It was a beautiful *dhikr*. That's not to say that it can't be a beautiful *dhikr* without *salat ul tasbīh*, but one thing follows the other. I will give you another secret, not about cats. My Shaykh used to say this all the time: make *wuqufi qalbi*, just pause. Try to train yourself to think. As often as you can, pause and say, "Allah" three times in your *qalb*, and let what happens, happen; and then go back to your work.

We are told that about Jumah prayer: stop your work, come to the mosque, then go right back to your work. In Morocco, they all run out of the mosque with their shoes in their hands. It's a great feeling. You are seeing the manifestation of the command of Allah Swt as it lives through the lives of the people. How many people go back and cheat in their shops? I don't know. But at least in that moment, they are following the command of Allah. You never know how many last things there are, which proves the point of my talk today: ending is arbitrary. You can put a dam in the creek and for a while you will stop the creek. Try to stay in tune for a month, for a day, for an hour, on the elevator. Actually, it starts to happen.

Did you watch any of the Olympics? You start to feel bad for the person who won the silver. I can't get up out of the chair, and I feel bad for the person who won the silver. Everything is relative: "Oh, that poor guy. He only got the bronze." In this one, everybody wins the gold. This is the spiritual Olympics. Allah tells us, no matter what happens, if you make your *niyyat* for the month, and for the day, and you do the basic necessities, then your Ramadān will be counted. Counted means not just for the hereafter; it means you will get the benefit of it. Isn't it ironic: we fast for the sake of Allah, and the benefit comes to us? To do that, we have to turn our attention to our self.

This month doesn't just exist alone. There is an attitude in Ramadān, and a lot of meanings to it, just like there are levels of meanings in every word of Arabic. The common understand of the term talks about the camel's calves who can't stand the heat of the desert. The root word reflects the scorching heat of the desert on the baby camels' feet. So they lie down to protect their tender feet, and pull them up underneath. There is another meaning. It means a quiet, soothing spring. You have the heat of the day, the camels' tender feet, and a soothing *wadi*. Aren't we all seeking the *wadi*? How are we

going to appreciate the *wadi* if we don't experience the burning of the desert sand? You can look at the searing heat of Ramadān and how difficult it is, or you can treat Ramadān as a soothing spring for all the other difficulties in life, and the things you carry into it. What we get from it is the *rizq* of Allah Swt. Allah is pouring the *fadl* on us. "You spent the day with Me, and now here's your reward in the *iftār*. Keep now in the company of those you love and good people. Don't just while away that time."

We sat last night until very late again. We talked about different subjects. If you sit with Shaykh Nooruddeen and I, maybe we can give you a slightly different perspective on things. That's our job title in a way. But the greatest part of it is being together, the *suhbat*, being in the company of good people. There are so many levels of that company during this month. We have to treat every day with that kind of seriousness and that festiveness. We have to treat every day with that kind of effort and release, and appreciation. Appreciation in English is a very interesting word. When we say, "I appreciate something," it means we are grateful for it. Appreciation also means gaining in value, added value. It's like value-added services or products. That's what is happening. That's what we are experiencing, '*insh'allah*. Mevlana said this:

Take counsel with the righteous and note the Divine command given to the Prophet (sal): consult them. Their affairs are a matter for consultation. Their existence is for that purpose. In consultation, mistakes and errors occur less often. Human intellects are luminous, like lamps, and twenty lamps are brighter than one. There may happen to be among them one lamp or flame with spiritual light. For the jealousy of Allah sometimes lowers the veils, mingling the lofty with the low. He has said, "Travel. Seek your fortune in the world and reap its benefits." In all gatherings, seek among minds the kind of intellect found in the Prophet (sal), for the heritage of the

Prophet (sal) is the consciousness which perceives the unseen things before and after. Amid the inner eye to always be seeing that inner eye which the Mathnawi has not the power to describe. Hence, the majestic prophet has forbidden monasticism and going to the mountains to live as a hermit, in order that this kind of contact with the *awliyā* should never be lost. For to be looked upon by them is a blessing, and it is the elixir of eternal life.

I am very humbled and grateful and unworthy of those *awliyā* whom I represent. But perhaps some of their light has been able to reach me and come to you today, may Allah forgive me for any errors I have made. (*Du'ās*).