



Bismi-Llaabi-r-Rahmaani-r-Raheem

EVERYTHING HAS ITS PRICE, EVEN FREEDOM

by
Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

Fifth in the Series
Five Sundays on Tasawwuf
2010-2011

Lecture presented at the Zaawiya of
Shaykh Nooruddeen Durkee
Charlottesville, VA
24 April, 2011 20 Jumada al-Awwal 1432

Sura al Fatiha

AL-ḤAMDU-LI-LLĀHI, MUQALIBA-L-QULŪBI WA-L-ABSĀR.
ALLĀHUMMA ṬḤABIT QULŪBANA ʿALA ṢIRĀTIKA-L-QAWĪM,
WA-JʿALNĀ LI-WAJHIKA MUTTAJIHĪN,
WA ṢALLI ʿALA-Sh-ShAFĪʿI-L-HABĪB,
RAḤMATIL-ʿĀLAMĪN,
WA MANĀRI-L-NAJIYĪN, WA MARSĀ-L-ʿĀRIFĪN

Praise be to Allah, the turner of the hearts and sight.
O Allah, fix our hearts on the best of Your ways,
and make us face You in our way,
and bestow blessings on the beloved intercessor,
the mercy of all the worlds,
the lighthouse of the survivors, the harbor of the knowers.

YĀ MAWJŪDAN ʿINDA-Sh-ShADĀĀʾIDI
YA KḤAFIYYA-L-LUṬFI, YĀ LATĪFA-S-SUNʿI
YĀ HALĪMAN, LĀ YAʾJILUQDI ḤĀJATĪ
BI-RAḤMATIKA, YĀ ARḤAMA-R-RĀḤIMĪN.
SUBḤĀNAKA ʿALĀ ḤILMIKA BAʿDA ʿILMIK.
SUBḤĀNAKA ʿALĀ ʿAFWIKA BAʿDA QUDRATIK

O Existent One, O Thou who are Present in all difficulties.
O Thou of Hidden Kindness, of Subtle making.

O Gentle One, Who does not hasten, fulfill my need,
 With Thy Mercy, O most Merciful of the Mercifuls.
 Glory be to Thee, on Thy Grace, after Thy Knowledge.
 Glory be to Thee, on Thy forgiveness, after Thy Power.

BISMI-LLĀH, AL-HAMDU-LI-LLĀH

ALLĀHUMMA SALLI WA SALLIM ʿALĀ SAYYIDINĀ MUḤAMMADIN, WA ʿALĀ ĀĀLIHI WA SAḤBIHI

INTRODUCTION

We all yearn for freedom, but who among us can define it? Some live exhorting it, and some die in the name of it. But who among those can really attest to experiencing it? Is it absolute freedom that we seek, or relative freedom? Is freedom monolithic and recognizable by everyone, or is it culturally, ethnically, economically, politically, and psychologically defined? Is freedom something that one strives for but never attain (or only few attain)? Is freedom a universal desire or an individual one? Is it a right or is it a gift? Can one be free, despite physical constraints or containments? Can someone who is in prison be free? What about the prison of illness, mental disease, emotional attacks, religious bigotry, prejudice or poverty?

These questions and more set the stage for our discussion of freedom today, and lead us to try to better understand what freedom is, where it exists. Freedom has manifestations, reflections and meaning in both the *baatīn* and the *d̥haahir*. One can appear to be free in the *d̥haahir* (the seen world) and not be free in the *baatīn* (unseen world). Or, one can be free in the *baatīn*, and chained in the *d̥haahir*. Our challenge today is to seek to better understand this subject, as a reality and as a goal. Here, today, we sit in a line of many, following the direction of those who have walked on the path of life and chosen the direction of Freedom, Love, Justice, Mercy and Peace.

So, as I speak today about this subject of freedom (*ḥurriyya*, in Arabic), I will speak about freedom as it is manifest, or can be manifest, in both the *d̥haahir* and the *baatīn*. Freedom can be the most sublime manifestation of human perfection, granted by the Mercy of Allah, as the station of *inṣaan al-kaamil* (the most perfected human being) and exemplified in the life of the Prophet (*ṣalla-Llaahu ʿalayhi wa sallam*). At the same time, it is also manifest in the life of every person as the most basic human right: the freedom to choose, granted to every human being from their first breath.

MEANINGS IN THE WORD 'FREEDOM'

When you think about freedom, what do you picture? Do you imagine that freedom means being able to do whatever you want whenever you want it? That certainly is the picture painted for us by today's society and media. We live in a society constantly seeking more and more freedoms. But what we don't realize is that yearning for freedom in the outer is simply a manifestation of yearning for freedom in the inner. To be truly free means to be free to reach your highest potential, to be truly complete, at peace, surrendered. In Arabic the root word: *Kaf-Mim-Lam* (*ka-ma-la*) has very interesting and revealing meanings for our journey to freedom, meanings that illuminate the true meaning of freedom as a journey to perfection, to completion, to wholeness, to maturity, to understanding our complementary (*takmeele*) role: the final and complete integration and unification of the perfect whole. Indeed, the saying, "the whole is greater than the sum total of its parts" applies and means, in this case, that there is a point at which what we can attain to, in the limited and defined (i.e. life itself), can be transcended by the Will of the greater Whole: Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ʿaalaa*).

As concerns the journey itself, it is clear that this station is one of integration and inclusivity, and maturing, ripening (*iktimaal*). Interestingly, the antonym for freedom is *naqasa* (nun-qaf-saad), meaning to decrease, diminish, reduce, impair; to be deficient, defective, faulty, or imperfect. This is very important as well, because perfecting is a dynamic part of the system, and its opposite takes us literally in the opposite direction: we become diminished, reduced in stature, impaired.

FREEDOM OF CHOICE

What Allah has given us, and none of His other creatures (except the *jinn*) is the freedom to choose, the ability to choose between a path that takes us nearer and nearer to that station of integration, completion and ripening or a path that reduces and diminishes our innate goodness. In a *hadith* that we are all familiar with, Abu Huraira (*radiya-Llaahu ‘anhu*) narrated that the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said, **“Every child is born a Muslim (i.e. in submission), but his parents convert him to Judaism or to Christianity or to Magianism...”** (Bukhari). This *hadith* illustrates several of the points I wish to make today about freedom: first is that we are all born equals, free and in complete submission. Thus, from our first breath the concept of submission/servant-hood as the path to freedom is established. I will return to this point, but before that let me go into a second point that can be learned from this *hadith*: freedom of choice.

As we all know, Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*) has created *jinn*'s and humans to be capable of both mischief and graciousness with the ability to choose—to choose to be pious or not. The freedom of choice is the most basic and universal freedom given to human beings and *jinn*, by Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*). Yet, we enter this world not of our choice and live the first years in total submission. Obviously, we must learn how to direct that freedom to choose. We are given that freedom, and we are told in Qur’an that we are all slaves of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*), *‘abd*.

IN KULLU MAÑ FĪ-S-SAMĀWĀTI WA-L-’ARDI ILLĀ ĀTĪ AR-RAḤMĀNI ‘ABDĀ

There is no one in the heavens and the earth who doesn’t come to the Merciful as a worshipful slave (‘ABDĀ). (19:93)

In the Qur’an there are two concepts that touch on this: *‘ibaad* and *‘aabid*. Although they both are translated as servants, there is a distinction that is important. In the Qur’an, people are referred to both as Allah’s *‘aabid* (: worshiper/adorer) and His *‘abd* (: slave/servant). Both come from the same root (), but one indicates the subtlety of choosing to serve, while the other shows complete submission. Thus, the noun ‘worshipper’ in Arabic can refer to someone who both obeys and disobeys at the same time. The implication is found in this *ayah*:

QUL YĀ ‘IBĀDIYA-LLADḤĪNA ASRAFŪ ‘ALĀ ANFUSIHIM LĀ TAQ^āNATŪ MIR-RAḤMATI-LLĀH.

O My servants (‘IBĀDIYA) who have transgressed against their souls! Do not despair of the Mercy of Allah. (39:53)

Sometimes it conveys both aspects: obedience and disobedience:

NABBI’ ‘IBĀDĪ ANNĪ ANĀ-L-GḤAFŪRU-R-RAḤĪM.

Tell My servants (‘IBĀDĪ) that I am indeed the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (15:49)

These *ayah* inform us, among other things, that we are created in such a way as to be able to choose obedience or disobedience, devotion or arrogance, submission or rebellion. So important is this essential freedom of choice, that

if we persuade or coerce people into believing or disbelieving, we are disregarding the Word of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*):

LĀ IKRĀHA FĪ-D-DĪN. QAD TABAYYANA-R-RUSHDU MINA-L-GhAYYI...

Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth has been made clear from error... (2:256)

Also, in Surah Yunus:

WA LAW SHĀA'A RABBUKA LĀA'AMANA MAÑ FI-L-'ARḌI KULLUHUM JAMĪ'AN AFĀÑTA TUKRIHU-N-NĀSA ḤATTĀ YAKŪNŪ MU'MINĪN.

If it had been your Lord's Will that everyone on Earth would have believed, would you coerce people into becoming believers? (10:99)

Without freedom of choice, how can we understand the *Yawm al-Qiyamah* (the Day of Judgment), or the Hereafter? Five times in Qur'an Allah refers to His worshipful slave (*abd*) in relation to the Day of Judgment and Hereafter:

...ANNA-LLĀHA LAYSA BI-DḤALLĀMIL-LI-L-'ABĪD.

...for verily, Allah is not unjust to His servants. (3:182)

And in Surah Qaaaf:

...MĀA ANA BI-DḤALLĀMIL-LI-L-'ABĪD.

...I do not do the least injustice to My servants. (50:29)

On that day, we will have no choice but to obey and conform to the laws created by Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*)—we will all be *'abd*. On that day, we will not even be permitted to speak. In this world we can believe or not believe, obey or disobey, because we are *'ibaad*...but in the Hereafter there is not that freedom of choice.

...

WA SĪQA-LLADHĪNA KAFARŪ ILĀ JAHANNAMA ZUMARAN ... WA SĪQA-LLADHĪNA ITTAQAW RABBAHUM ILĀ-L-JANNATI ZUMARAN

... the unbelievers will be led to Hell in crowds and ...those who feared their Lord will be led to the Garden in crowds. (39:71 & 73)

We are Allah's *'ibaad* in this world and *'aabid* in the Hereafter.

FREEDOM IN THE OUTER

As I have stated, freedom of choice is our most essential right; it is the unique quality that gives us the ability to reach the highest states or fall to the lowest depths. This gift, given to us by Allah, should be maintained in both the outer and the inner. We have seen what true freedom in the outer looks like, manifest in the community of the Prophet (*salla-Llahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*); but where do we see that kind of peace, equality and unity of purpose now? We know it is a possibility, but only if it is reflective of an inner freedom, which has been attained by some and which is also promised by Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*). In Surah an-Nahl:

WA QĪLA LI-LLADHĪNA ITTAQAW MĀDHĀ ANZALA RABBUKUM QĀLŪ KHAYRAL-LI-LLADHĪNA AḤSANŪ FĪ HĀDHĪHI-D-DUNYĀ ḤASANATUŅW...

And it will be said to those who, conscious of Allah, guarded themselves from evil, “What did your Lord send down?” They will say, “Goodness!” For those who excel [in doing good] in this world—good fortune... (16:30)

Political and social reform, if it is truly to promote the freedom and rights of individuals, must find its basis in the rights and freedom guaranteed in the Qur’an, based on the choice of individuals – choices based on the essential tolerance, goodness, love, mercy, justice inherent in Islam. Whether attainable or not, certainly the qualities and values we have been discussing over these months form a foundation for the possibility. The fact is that unfortunately, freedom in many parts of the world today means ‘free to oppress,’ (especially in the name of freedom). Why, then, are some surprised at rebellion against hypocrisy and greed and subjugation done in the name of religion? Often it seems we forget:

KULLU NAFSĪN DhĀA’IQATU-L-MAWTI WA NABLŪKUM BI-SH-SHARRI WA-L-KHAYRI FITNAH.

Every soul shall have a taste of death, and We test you with evil and good by way of trial. (21:35)

Unfortunately, we find too often that human beings forget this and, acting as if they will live forever, use their power to take away freedoms from those who are weaker, poorer, less educated, from women and children, and from those who are different in culture, custom, race or religion. Do we forget what Allah tells us:

YĀ AYYUHĀ-N-NĀSU INNĀ KHALAQNĀKUM MIŅ DhAKARĪŅW-WA’UNThĀ WA JA‘ALNĀKUM SHU‘ŪBANW-WA QABĀA’ILA LI-TA‘ĀRAFŪ...

O humanity! We created you from a single male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know each other... (49:13)

This coming to love one another is a process of choosing to love one another, not just to tolerate one another. Differentiating between law and custom is a difficult distinction in most countries and societies. Customs are assumptions engendered over time by a group of mostly homogeneous people. Law on the other hand, for a Muslim and indeed for every created being, originates in the Will of the Divine. Can one Muslim be free in the outer if another is enslaved? Can one Muslim or group of Muslims, or one human being or a group of human beings dictate the way to freedom from an ideological point of view, when the true path to freedom is an inner path

to *insaan i kaamil* (a subject to which I will return later in this talk)? If we do not free our self from spiritual ignorance and ideological tyranny in the outer, how can we hope for any equity or freedom in the inner or outer for ourselves, let alone attempt to free our brethren?

Freedom cannot exist without justice, mercy, love, and without the system being in balance. We cannot focus only on love and forget wisdom and knowledge, or develop the intellect without mercy and love. A free man or woman is an example of someone in whom everything is in balance: love, intellect, mercy, justice, freedom, service, piety ... principles that are the reflections of the Attributes of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaah*). The desire for and the pursuit of freedom, outer and inner, is universal and one of the most valuable of qualities of the human being. Freedom is among the highest of human values, which is above man's animal nature and material values. You can see that those who possess humanity are willing to bear hunger and nakedness, and live under hard conditions, provided they are not enslaved by another human being and can live freely. A story is told in the book of "The Mirror of Scholars", about Avicenna who held the rank of a minister for some time.

One day, Avicenna was passing through a street with great pomp and show when he noticed a scavenger removing putrid stuff from a pit. Avicenna heard him murmuring to himself a couplet meaning that he honored his "self" for finding his world easy. Avicenna laughed to hear this man doing the lowest task so contently. He drew the rein of his horse called the man to him and remarked sarcastically:

"What a way to choose to honor the 'self!'" The man, on recognizing Avicenna by his appearance, said:

"I have chosen this job so that I would not be the slave of another in the way you are! To enjoy freedom while being a scavenger is far better than your rank, assets and dependence."

Hearing this, Avicenna became red in the face with shame and had no answer to give.

In this story, we see the value of freedom over the material things of this world. For one of conscience, awareness and understanding, the ultimate truth is knowing who the Master is and who the servant is. The subtle value of this attitude need not be so extremely enacted—that is, one's choice being between a scavenger or a nobleman—but it is the values of society and the individuals that need to be focused on and awakened.

Haẓrat Umar ibn al Khattab (radiya-Llaahu 'anhu) used the term 'freedom' (meaning justice and equity) when he said, with regard to the incident of al-Qutby and ibn Amru ibn al- 'As: "Since when did you enslave people, whose mothers had given birth to them as free beings?"

Social freedoms are reflective of the principle of individual freedom; society must guarantee a means toward freedom as much as the Qur'an provides for internal freedom, as exemplified in the life of the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) and the *sahaabah*.

CALL FOR A RETURN TO FREEDOM

Most people take for granted the freedoms they do have, and are apathetic about the freedoms they don't have. But recently, we have seen the inner yearning for freedom awakening in people. People are calling for freedom across the 'Muslim' world. But we have also seen how, as soon as that internal yearning from freedom emerges from the inner into the outer, it begins to be corrupted, serving as a reminder of how inner aspirations can become subverted by greed, power, money, short-sightedness, and the willful ignorance of the reality of life and death. Take, for example, the revolutionary change in Egypt.

This revolution began with a simple call for freedom and the re-assertion of truly Islamic values, based on the belief that freedom and justice are possible. But that purity could not last, and we see now the elements of religious extremism, as well as the secular, impious oppressors raising their ugly heads, abdicating the wave of sincere and aspiring change, as manifest in the young people who elicited this change in governance. Without sustainable values

and goals that are inclusive and truly Islamic in nature, religion becomes a tool of the arrogant and ignorant. We have seen this 'devolution' from inner potential to outer reality on the real 'reality' TV in the past few months in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and growing in other countries and communities of Muslims. Freedom and freedoms become redefined, not as intended by Qu'ran and the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*), but as practiced in the real politic of the time.

ISLAMIC FOUNDATION FOR FREEDOM

In the Holy Qur'an, there is certainly a foundation for freedom in a civil society that begins with the individual commitment. In Islam, freedom is lauded as a consultative process for the common weal or common good. As we know, *shuuraa* (consultation) is a foundation of Islam for over 1420-odd years and serves as a bridge between spiritual practice and faith, and outer stability.

WA-LLADHĪNA ISTAJĀBŪ LI-RABBIHIM WA AQĀMŪ AṢ-ṢALĀTA WA AMRUHUM SHŪRĀ
BAYNAHUM WA MIMMĀ RAZAQ^āNĀHUM YUŅFIQŪN.

And those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular prayer, who [conduct] their affairs by mutual consultation (SHŪRĀ), who spend out of what We bestow on them for sustenance. (42:38)

Where is there true *shuuraa* today? Where is the education of what is truly freedom, and where is the trust in Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*)? What is the consequence of an ignorant *Ummah*, manipulated to be soldiers in a war against the *kuffaar* when they are being led by *kaafirs*, kept ignorant of the path of *ruuh*, of the experience of struggling with the *nafs i ammaarah* and *nafs i lanwaamah*, unaware of or rejecting the *jihad al-akbar* (the greater *jihad* for the lesser *jihad*)? The endless empiric wars of the Western and Eastern powers over the past century are reflected in the endless war against the *kaafirs*. Both constructs are to suppress freedom, to deny choice, to dis-affirm the example of the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*), and to undermine all that would develop and affirm the *fitrah*: essential goodness of human beings.

Just like a nation is a conglomerate or huge institution prone to mismanagement and corruption, our life is also a conglomerate of systems and forces prone to entropy, physical deterioration, selfishness and corrupting influences; yet, we are enjoined to "command good and forbid evil" (*ma'ruf and munkar*). As Allah reminds us in Surah al-Imraan:

KUŅTUM KHAYRA UMMATIN UKHRIJAT LI-N-NĀSI TA'MURŪNA BI-L-MA'RŪFI WA
TANHAWNA 'ANI-L-MUŅKARI WA TU'MINŪNA BI-LLĀH...

And you are the best community that has been brought forth for [the good] of humanity. You enjoin goodness and you forbid evil and you believe in Allah... (3:110)

From this we can derive first the necessity and desirability of society, and the imperative for the members of those societies to come to a communitarian state of respect, love and cooperation. That all implies structure as well as the means to keep it growing. If we forget that, we are disregarding the intricacies and the subtleties of the *Ummah*, the inner meaning of the *jamad'at*, and the instruction of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) to strive for social order and perfecting based on love and mutual respect. Striving is the countervailing force to corruption, and as everything in the physical must deteriorate, the correlative force for good must then reflect what is eternal and good, everlasting and sustaining.

So, we strive in the outer for what can only be found in the inner. Yet, it can be reflected for periods of time, and certainly in character in the sphere of living beings. What we want for ourselves and our brothers and sisters in this world is sustainable faith, sustainable peace and sustainable justice. That can only happen when the work, the life, the intention that we have is to be inwardly dedicated to Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*), and toward following His commands and enjoinders to us. Is such a sustainable peace possible? It is unlikely in this world, but the foundation is poured here for the future home in the Hereafter. It is said that if you begin to build a *masjid*, Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) will bring it to completion—so too, with our soul’s future, our life.

In the outer, we can hope for moments of peace and relative freedom of speech, conditional freedom to worship as one pleases, closely monitored freedom of the press, etc. Things that we are told are basic freedoms, in reality have many restrictions and caveats. Just as we (in this country) are all granted civil liberties (regularly abrogated), we must protect what we truly have in the inner: the urge to freedom and the methods provided by Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*). Just as the desire to sustain freedoms is averred to in law, albeit rarely achieved and too easily discarded, that articulation and affirmation attest to the inherent and intrinsic urge to freedom and perfection. We have to distinguish between the inner compelling force and the harsh reality of the rhetoric in the outer. In other words, things in the outer can point (*isharat*) to the validity and importance of something, yet not be it or even achieve it, merely being the affirmation of its existence.

Just as everything in the outer (*dḥaabir*) is a reflection of the inner, we also must protect and strive for freedom in the inner (*baatin*). But in the inner, we strive for freedoms found in worship, in *dhikr*, in serving others, and in that way serving Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*), which only can be found in the engagement with Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) in the Qur’an, in *muraaqabah*, in *tafakkur*.

FREEDOM IN THE INNER

Our soul knows the feeling of freedom, even if our body does not. How many of us have seen a bird flying high in a clear blue sky on a cloudless day and wished for that kind of freedom? This world is full of things that weigh us down, distract us, and keep us from ‘flight.’ But what we don’t understand is that bird’s freedom does not come from his outer physical ability to fly. Instead, it is a freedom that comes from having ‘no choice,’ a freedom that comes from only doing what he is destined to do – no more and no less. We too can find this freedom of the inner—true freedom that comes from knowing who we are, who our Master is, what our goal is and then fulfilling as best we can what that entails. The pursuit of freedom in the inner is the road to perfecting one’s faith, one’s compassion, one’s mercy and patience and love. It is the path to unveiling the secrets and the hidden, understanding the outer and inner realities, including understanding and appreciating the worth of ourselves and others.

True freedom must transcend the physical and material life; it is found only by those who would consciously, intentionally, and humbly pursue it. To me, that is a life’s journey of interfacing with good and evil, right and wrong, truth and untruth, freely choosing the former and rejecting the latter, based on humility, trust and insight born of *dhikr* and *muraaqabah*, and of course, ultimately completed by the grace of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*). This creation, our life, is a preparatory venue for the development of character and characteristics of an evolving human being, a perfecting being who, in his or her personal goal and ever increasing capabilities, seeks a balanced life in the outer and a freedom in the inner. Throughout the millennia we have called this station: *insaan i kaamil*.

We travel that road of perfecting seeking degrees of freedom, waiting perhaps for the gift from Allah the Merciful, of the station of *insaan i kaamil*, the station in which we are in such submission to Allah that we are free. What can compel us from within to maintain and sustain this journey of evolution, this revolution (*inqilaab*) of turning, ever turning, from this world to the next, from the seen to the unseen? As we turn toward seeing, attributing the qualities of the Divine Presence here and now, we are truly coming to the *maqamaat*, one by one, of a freer and freer human being, until the day of ultimate awareness and ultimate freedom, when we know with complete certainty that Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) is present (near as your life itself, nearer than the jugular vein). This is our goal. However, as the individual becomes more and more free, the importance of the goal recedes. After all, in

complete unity, even the goal must disappear. Allah (*Subhānahu wa taʿālaa*) says, “*Kun fa-yakuun...be and it became.*” We must pursue until there is nothing left to pursue, diving into the Ocean of Allah (*Subhānahu wa taʿālaa*), of prayer, of meditation, of *dhikru-Llah* (*Subhānahu wa taʿālaa*).

I began today by speaking about outer, political and social freedoms, which are constructs that reflect the essential gift of choice given by Allah (*Subhānahu wa taʿālaa*) to human beings. The path to inner freedom also is based on choice. It is a choice that the seeker must see, not as an entitlement, but as an inherent desire placed in the heart of the human being. That urge is transferred to the value system of *dunya*, but it cannot be fully fulfilled in that sphere, even though the effort is sincere, the motives good and the goals noble. As much as we seek freedom in the outer, we create and embrace our own prisons. Fear of change, years of conditioning by society and culture, preferences and the convenience of habits that even support a kind of pleasurable self-imposed misery keep us from pursuing freedom. True freedom is rare, yet attainable, with the element of pardon attached. Allah (*Subhānahu wa taʿālaa*) is All Merciful and that last step in this journey to freedom centers on that *rahmat* and nothing else. Today, I will also focus on presenting to you some of the elements that are the means to true inner freedom, also the way to fully engage in and be satisfied with those means, in a realistic, mature and refined way. Fruit is sweet when it is ripe and mature; people are sweet and exhibit the profound and subtle attributes of the Divine when they are themselves refined and mature. The path to freedom, outer and inner, takes courage, dedication, cooperation, trust, patience, vision, hope and faith.

PERFECT-ING BEINGS: *INSAANU-L-KAAMIL*

I have mentioned several times, *insaanu-l-kaamil*, the perfected being, the truly free being. In general, as human beings, we tend to dismiss this station as unattainable, and thus excuse ourselves from trying to attain it. Unattainable goals are an anathema to most human beings; hence, we reduce our expectations of ourselves, while keeping the pretense of high goals and hopes. This physical world is one of compromise and disappointments; thus to live and to survive, we have learned or have been conditioned to believe that only what is attainable is the penultimate of what is possible. When we set our goals and expectations, we tie them to effort in the outer, never thinking that there are totally other worlds of attainment and success, worlds and goals that transcend the limitations of this physical world. The outer embraces the inner as the ultimate direction and goal.

What we don't think of when we think about 'perfection' is that the word perfect or 'complete' reflects a plan or direction. Certainly, if any part of a building or a plan, for example, is unfinished, it is clearly incomplete. But in terms of [the concept of] 'complete' there is much more of an open-endedness. We could always do more: add more, expand, renovate, redecorate, invent, create something new from the old. If something is complete, it can be more and more complete. Similarly, with knowledge, at one stage it is complete; but there exist higher and higher degrees of completion or perfection or wholeness, as knowledge and our capacity to hold it and see it matures. The vertical nature of perfection occurs almost spontaneously, as the horizontal process of progress attains to a point where there is a moment (*waqt*) when the vertical ascent (toward *insaanu-l-kaamil*) takes place. In the world we inhabit, this process of perfecting is one of freeing oneself daily, degree by degree, from the excesses and veils that stand in the way of this moment of ascent. But the possibility of reaching this moment is enhanced, or enabled, by certain character traits, behaviors and principles of society, as well those inherent in the *fitrah* of each created individual.

THE PERFECT EXAMPLE

Of course the best (if not the only) example of someone who has achieved this station of *insaanu-l-kaamil* can be found in the Prophet (*salla-Llahu ʿalayhi wa sallam*), who had a perfected character and was sent to help us on the journey toward perfecting our characters. As he said,

I was not sent except to complete the best of character.

In the life of *Rasūlu-Llāh* (*salla-Llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*), there is not a moment when he was not remembering Allah, making some *dh̄aa*, whether standing, sitting or lying down, whether in public view or in private; because in everything he did, in every situation, and in every challenge he faced, whether happy or sad, in hardship or ease, submission to Allah was the very breath of his life. And through that, Allah raised him up to the highest station, a station of freedom and perfection beyond our comprehension. All we can do is emulate that character and pray for a taste of the true, limitless freedom that he was granted by Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta‘aalaa*). There is no question that he was weighed down by the responsibilities, the pains and the trials of this world; yet, through inner freedom, through a perfected character, he achieved a freedom beyond what we can imagine. When we look at his character we find a very humble person, a person whose heart is awake, a person who is immersed in the remembrance of Allah. Everything in his life reminds him of Allah, and reminds him to make a *dh̄aa*. The remembrance is loving and joyful, and there’s not a moment of forgetting. We find a heart that knows that Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta‘aalaa*) is everything, and that he, himself, is nothing – a complete servant (*‘abd*) in complete submission.

The Prophet (*salla-Llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) is our living model of one who has achieved the state of *insaanu-l-kaamil*. Lest we forget, the *insaanu-l-kaamil* is the one, perfect soul who in this station has no desire other than the good pleasure of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta‘aalaa*), and his movements are acts of goodness and acts of worship. When people see him, they are reminded of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta‘aalaa*). Constantly worshipping with his body, tongue or heart and asking for forgiveness in abundance, and intensely humble, [one who is perfected] has returned to this world and delights in seeing other beings turn toward the Real and the Truth, and experiences sorrow and anger when he/she sees others turn away from Allah. He loves the seeker of truth more than he loves his own child, and has no hatred or enmity in his heart for any creature. In a *hadith* related in Bukhari and Muslim, the Prophet said:

“None of you believes, until he loves me more than he loves his children, his parents, and all people.” In another *hadith* in Bukhari he said: **“None of you believes until he loves me more than he loves himself.”**

One who carries that station to the Hereafter is near to the Throne, is one whose purified soul has returned fulfilled and fulfilling. Entering this world with the potential for perfection, attaining to that perfection and freeing oneself of the bonds of the lower nature, [that soul] exits this world, returning to our Lord as Allah describes in Surah al-Fajr:

YĀ AYYATUHĀ-N-NAFSU-L-MUTMA’INNA
IRJĪ ILĀ RABBIKI RĀDIYATAM-MARDIYYA.

O you soul whose self is at Peace!
Return to your Lord well pleased, well pleasing. (89:27-28)

Our goal is to follow that example to the best of our ability, to be an exemplary being whose values are clear and positive, who is sound of judgment and principle, a model for others, emulating the example of the Prophet (*salla-Llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*), spiritually and intellectually. There are two ways to know or recognize such a person. The first is to see how the Qur’an and the Sunnah define such a being: one who is faithful, good and sincere and one who has perfected faith. The second is to look at those persons who have constructed their lives around this goal, maturing and perfecting their example in a real and objective character. They are those who exist in various stages of perfecting. The Prophet (*salla-Llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) of course is an example of this, as are other *Aḥlu-l-bayt*, the *shuyukh* and the *awliyaa* who transcended sect and sectarianism, who lived the truth, who exemplified justice, mercy, love and peace.

And in Surah Tawbah:

LAQAD JĀA'AKUM RASŪLUM-MIN ANFUSIKUM ʿAZĪZUN ʿALAYHI MĀ_ʿANIT_TUM ḤARĪṢUN
ʿALAYKUM BI-L-MU'MINĪNA RAŪFUR-RAḤĪM.

Certainly, an Apostle has come to you from among yourselves. Grievous to him is your falling into distress, excessively solicitous respecting you, to the believers (he is) compassionate, merciful. (9:128)

JOURNEY TOWARD PERFECTING

There are those of us who are driven, compelled from within to journey toward this type of freedom, toward perfection and completion, toward evolving toward the inclusive being. Knowing we will always fall short, we strive nonetheless, in the hope that Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) will have mercy on us, and grant us just a moment of perfection, a breeze of freedom blowing through the bars of this world. What we must remember is that perfection differs by creature and role. A perfect human being is not the same as an angel created with pure intelligence and bereft of desires, lusts, etc.; nor is it the perfection of an animal, which is earthly and lacks the light of the Divine *ruh*. The vast majority of people are both angelic and worldly. As Rumi described it:

A narration says that the Glorious God created three different groups of creatures: The first group is the angels who are pure intellect, knowledge and liberality, and know only prostration. They lack every element of greed and passion, but are pure light, and alive with the love of God. Another group lacks knowledge altogether, fattened animals in the pasture; they see nothing but the stable and fodder and are ignorant of both villainy and honor. The third group is human beings who are half angel and half donkey, the donkey half is inclined to the low and the other half is inclined to the sublime; one must see which half wins the day, and which one conquers the other.

And as Allah reminds us in Surah al-Insan:

INNĀ KHALAQNĀ-L-ʾINŚĀNA MIN NUTFĀTIN AMSHĀJIN NABTALĪHI FA-JAʿALNĀHU
SAMĪʿAM BAṢĪRĀ. INNĀ HADAYNĀHU-S-SABĪLA. IMMĀ SHĀKIRAN̄W-WAʾIMMĀ KAFŪRĀ.

Surely, We have created man from a small life-germ uniting [itself]: We mean to try him, so We have made him hearing, seeing. Surely, We have shown him the way. He may be thankful or unthankful. (76: 2-3)

As I began today, we human beings are distinguished by our freedom of choice. The perfecting man or woman learns how to choose, which distinguishes him/her from the other creatures – at least if our choices are built on values and human capabilities. As one progresses, the choices become less and less as the being becomes more and more in harmony with the attributes from whence we come, until one is fully free/integrated and chooses not to choose (*tadbeer*). This gift is the greatest of all, perhaps, because it requires a values system that is universal and transcendent of the limits of this physical world. What we must remember as we struggle to make right choices each day that this is all a process, a journey *toward perfecting*.

Take, for example, a child of five years of age. If a child were just a small adult, we could conceivably project the same proportions and expectations on one age 5 to one who has grown to age 19. The result would be a deformed 'adult,' why because not only is growth in time and size but also in proportion. There is a potential mature adult in

the child, but it is not based on maintaining the same proportions as the child. Instead, what we can expect is for that five-year old to be the best five-year old he/she can be, and that 19-year old to be the best young adult he/she can be. So too, spiritually, there is a subtlety with regard to spiritual freedom and maturity. It is more than acquiring knowledge or information or even spiritual license. It is based on the subtle refinement of the inner being through practice, values, principles and finally grace (*fadh*).

QUALITIES OF THE FREE: POVERTY AND DEVOTION

Just as we can identify one of diminishing character by their qualities – prejudiced, lower, lacking, and many *naqaa'is* (defects, shortcomings, failings, faults, imperfections) – so too there are signs of the perfecting being. The signs (*'alam*) of the perfecting being are apparent. One of these qualities of the truly free is their spiritual poverty. It has been said of these people that:

If the hunger and pains of others become more difficult to bear than one's own hunger and pain, it is a value which is the basis of personality and a source of other human values. It involves a feeling of responsibility towards other human beings and their needs and sufferings.

As Allah reminds us in Surah al-Ankabut:

AḤASIBA-N-NĀSU AŅY-YUTRAKŪ AŅY-YAQŪLŪ ĀMANNĀ WA HUM LĀ YUFTANŪN. WA LAQAD FA-TANNĀ-LLADHĪNA MIŅ QABLIHIM FA-LAYA'LAMANNA-LLĀHU-LLADHĪNA SADAQŪ WA LAYA'LAMANNA-L-KĀDHIBĪN.

Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, “We believe,” and not be tried? And certainly We tried those before them, so Allah will certainly know those who are true and He will certainly know the liars. (29: 2- 3)

So we come to another quality of the perfected free being: devotion. In this, I mean being aware of and in constant communion with the Divine, no matter what tests and trials we are faced with. Devotion is outwardly manifest as maturity and responsibility. We speak of a devoted husband, wife, friend, worker, servant, or citizen. The devoted servant of Allah is grateful and focused on his/her duty to Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'ālaa*), to society and to family. Having work that provides sustenance and constructive interface with society is a form of devotion, *'ibaadah*, and to be pure *'ibaadah* there must be a refined sense and expression of *adab*. But devotion in its most intimate sense is communion with the Divine—in prayer, in *muraaqabah*, in *khidmah*, in *tafakkur*, in sacrifice. It is *khidmah* with the tenderness of love.

Some people among the Muslims believe that devotion is only an outer spiritual or religious act, and thus neglect the finer, more subtle acts of public service, service through kindness in word and deed, love for ones brother/sister, patience, striving toward knowledge, beyond habit. (All of which can be found as enjoinders, commands and examples in the Qur'an and Sunnah.) More than physical devotions, this characteristic is exemplified by moderation and cooperation. Such is the example of the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*), who was a perfected being living in absolute freedom, despite the outer circumstances.

It was once reported to the Prophet that a number of his companions had sunk in devotion. The Prophet felt uneasy, came to the mosque and shouted it out loud: “O People, what has happened to some groups who have appeared among my people? Even I as your Prophet do not show devotion in this way to keep awake all night. I rest part of the night and attend to my family. I do not observe fast every day. Those who are following their new way have deviated from my tradition.”

As Allah reminds us in Qur'an:

LAYSA-L-BIRRA AÑ TUWALLŪ WUJŪHAKUM QIBALA-L-MASHRIQI WA-L-MAGhRIBI WA LĀKINNA-L-BIRRA MAN ĀMANA BI-LLĀH...

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteousness is this that one should believe in Allah.... (2:177)

The poet Sa'di says: *"Devotion is nothing but serving people."* Some of us spend a great deal of time and energy, in fact a great part of our livelihood in service to humanity. But unless that service to humanity is founded, daily and consciously, on service to Allah (*fee sabeeli-Llaah*), then the benefits are only temporary, and often limited in time and accomplishment. That is, we can feed the poor or create mechanisms for better communication, civil society, health and well-being; yet we miss the opportunity to link it through love and gratitude, through compassion and tolerance to the Owner of those Attributes. By this I do not mean articulating doctrine; rather, I mean personally committing to living one's inner belief and permitting one's own love for Allah (*Subhaanahu wa t'aaalaa*) and for the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) to speak through our conscious and purposeful acts of service and duty to His creatures/creation.

ADDRESSING THE "HOW"

So today I have spoken about freedom in the outer, and freedom in the inner. I have reminded you of the example of the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) who was the most submitted and the most free. I would like to conclude today by addressing some of the how – how we can journey, perfecting ourselves and our character, and hopefully achieve, through this perfecting, some of the freedom that our soul craves. We see this journey toward perfection as the freeing us of the bonds of the lower nature, and the gradual receptivity of the Attributes of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa t'aaalaa*) through the *ruh* into our heart and uplifting our *nafs*. This is a journey:

Towards Allah (Subhaanahu wa t'aaalaa) (meaning, finding the direction, i.e. turning toward Allah (Subhaanahu wa t'aaalaa))

With Allah in Allah (meaning, knowing Allah as present)

With Allah (as His creation and creatures)

For as long as one is separated from Allah (in perception), everything is imbalanced. But even after moments of awareness of Allah's Presence and nearness, knowing and approaching Allah, feeling that Presence within oneself, we return to His creation in the company of Allah (reflecting the Divine Attributes and character of a Knower). Every moment we lose our self in the remembrance Allah, we are taking another step toward perfecting our self. We are increasing our insight, and our ability to give counsel and guidance, to assist, to adjust society, to create opportunities for others. As Allah reminds us in Surah Ta Ha:

MĀ AÑZALNĀ 'ALAYKA-L-QUR'ĀNA LI-TASHQĀ.

We have not revealed the Qur'an to you that you may be unsuccessful. (20:2)

POLISHING THE SOUL

I am reminded daily—and unfortunately for them, my student’s are reminded regularly by me—that there is no magic pill to freedom. There is no amount of time that you can pray, no magic number of *du’aa* you can recite to achieve freedom or perfection; there is no special knowledge of *fiqh*, or Sunnah, or Qur’an that will automatically ‘free you,’ ‘perfect you,’ or ‘give you salvation.’ This is a long hard road, and many prefer to take the seemingly easier path of the reflection of freedom—freedom in this world free from conscience, free from duties, free from service. There were many, many anecdotal and personal stories of a person who was instructed to do this, or recite that so many times, or memorize that in order to achieve a specific station or be guaranteed Jannah. Certainly, these things are true if said by our Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*), but they must be examined against the backdrop of how you live your life, how you speak, who you are in contact with, what is your service, your character? You cannot buy yourself into perfection or freedom; you must work your way there. And even then, everything is achieved through the Mercy of Allah.

We also need to remember the enemy, the jailer that keeps us from freedom, is within. As tempting and disruptive, as fearsome and distracting as the world is, it is our perspective, our attitude, our undisciplined self that responds and is tempted, disrupted and distracted. Hence, the practices, the *du’aa*, the *dhikr*, the study are a means of training and directing us, but still something we choose to do or not; choose to trust and sustain, or not. Let me share with you a story told by the Sufis that reminds us of the subtlety and importance of *perfect-ing*, not perfection.

Once, a King desired to find the best artist in the world. He set up a search and brought to his castle a group of Chinese artists who claimed that they were the best painters and a Sufi Shaykh. The king gave the Chinese and the Sufi each a room which opened one to the other and a month to prove their ability.

The Chinese started to paint the wall with beautiful pictures and requested hundreds of paint pigments from the King’s treasury. The Shaykh said, “I do not need any pigments,” and he started to polish the wall of the room, spending all of his time polishing the wall until no rust was left. Finally, the wall shone like a mirror.

When the Chinese finished painting their wall, they were jubilant and beat upon drums in joy. The King came and marveled at the beauty of the Chinese paintings on the wall. Then he came to the Sufi’s side of the room. The Sufi removed the veil. The reflection of the paintings from across the room on the mirror-like wall was, without a doubt, the most beautiful. In the Sufi’s reflective image the King saw himself standing in the midst of it of the garden; he was part of the beauty.

USING OUR DEFECTS AS REMINDER: EXAMPLE OF THE PEARL

This story reminds us that by polishing and polishing and polishing our character, we can ultimately reflect our portion of the Beauty and Qualities of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*) that surround us. What are we polishing? We are polishing away, over and over, the defects and incompleteness of our character. As much as we are frustrated by our defects, we can learn to see them as gifts from Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*), reminders to keep polishing. Take for example blindness, deafness, or disease. While these may appear to the outsider as defects, they certainly are not defects of the heart or soul, nor of ethic or virtue or humaneness. There have been many blind *awliyaa*, but they are not considered defective beings. Thus, once again, we are shown the two aspects of the human being: the inner state or character and the outer state of the physical being. A defect in the outer does not mean there is a defect in the inner.

The *ruh* is not dependent upon the body. Hence we must look at the discussion of freedom with an eye that sees two aspects of the human being. Freedom from disease on the physical plane is not a guarantee of freedom of the soul or heart; nor is the opposite true. Who we are will be seen by the eye of insight and love, by the one who sees through the eye of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*), and who at least strives to see through the eyes of the *awliyaa* of Allah, the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) and the Qur’an. Those who have no belief in the unseen only relate to the physical, the material, despite the language they use, judging others by their looks, their weight, their color, or ethnicity, their ability to speak with inspiration, their passions. Though freedom is hard to define and less easy to see, the perfection we seek is elusive and immaterial, yet it does have its correlative reflection in society. Sa’di said it this way:

*Man's body is ennobled by his soul,
And this fine garment is not a sign of humanity.
If man were known by his eyes, nose, mouth and ears,
What difference would there be between a picture on the wall and humanity?*

There is a saying: “How easy it is to become a scholar and how difficult to be a human being.” So then how difficult must it be to be a perfect and free human being. Life has its joys and rewards; yet, with its trials and vicissitudes, its pains and disappointments we find opportunities for remembering; awareness. These are blessings beyond measure—when we learn to turn those discomforts into reminders and affirmations of faith. This is what I understand is Sufism: to dive, dive, dive into the Ocean of Allah, until you find the oyster with the pearl. Remember that the pearl is the result of irritation of a foreign element (sand) that causes the oyster to protect itself. In so doing, the common oyster creates something more precious than itself, more precious than its own life. Indeed, it dies so that the beauty it created will be liberated; but it is created out of what is contained in the oyster. So too, if we treat our defects, our faults, our weaknesses as a reminder, as continual irritations that we must polish away, we will be creating a pearl in our character out of the potential Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaah*) has placed within us. Understand the pearl of the oyster represents the pearl of the soul, finally liberated from the shell of this life. No wonder Allah reminds us of the beauty of the pearl in Qur'an:

YAKHRUJU MINHUMĀ-LLU'LU'U WA-L-MARJĀN.
FA-BI'AYYI ĀLĀ'Ī RABBIKUMĀ TUKADh-DhIBĀN.

**From out of them comes both the pearl and the coral.
Which then of the favors of your Lord will you deny? (55:22-23)**

DIE BEFORE YOU DIE

Just as the oyster must die to release the pearl, so too, our goal is to shed the shell of attachments that chain us to this life, and to “die before we die.” Rumi wrote:

The sigh and groaning which are in sickness, provide a wakefulness at that time. When you fall ill, you feel penitent of guilt, and a sin will seem ugly to you. Then you resolve to follow the right path and promise to obey thenceforth. So it is certain that sickness has this benefit that it grants you alertness and care. Know then, you who are searching for causes, that he who feels pain, the greater is the awareness, and the greater the awareness, the paler the visage.

Last month, I told the story of the parrot in the cage who did not take his freedom when the door was opened until he was forced to by the clap of the hands of his liberator. There is another story about a parrot that I will share with you today:

There was a merchant in Persia who was to travel to India. Before he left, he said to his pet parrot, “I am going to India and I may see some of your relatives there. Is there any message which you wish me to convey to them?” The parrot thought and then he said, “Tell them that I am well, but that I live in a cage in a house.” When the merchant returned, the parrot said, “Did you see my relatives?” And the merchant replied, “I did, but I am afraid they are not well. When I gave one of them your message, he collapsed and fell to the ground.”

When the merchant said this, the parrot also collapsed and fell to the floor of the cage. Whereupon, the merchant felt great alarm, looking at the parrot he once loved and imprisoned without thought of its happiness or love of freedom. He picked up the now useless and soon to decay carcass of the bird and carried him to the window to dispose of its body. As he threw the bird out the window, the parrot miraculously recovered, flew out the window and escaped. He took the lesson given to him by his relative far away in space and time as an instruction, and secured his own release from his warder, who undoubtedly was attached to his beauty, but ambivalent to his loss of freedom.

What do these parables mean? Most of them tell of the human beings' desire to return to the next world, mixed with the apprehension and pain of separation, reminding us to never give up longing for Divine reunion. But this story is also a prescription for healing social ills, ills that we see constantly ignored in a self-centered, ambivalent and hostile world of self-indulging beings. A person who is both here and there is that person, like the parrot in the cage, but with a constant yearning to be home, where home is freedom. The perfect man or woman, one who is free, here goes along with others but their spirits fly high; and while they are here they are simultaneously in the unseen world.

Rumi quotes the parable of a man who was constantly in communion with Allah and kept on repeating the Divine Name. Shaytan came to him once and said: "With all your repetition of the Name of Allah, and your wakefulness at dawn for devotions, and your longing, did you ever hear once from Him saying: 'Here am I?' If you had gone to any other door and groaned so much, you would have received a response at least once."

This remark appeared logical to the man, so he kept silent and stopped his devotions. That night, in a dream, an invisible voice asked him as to why he had abandoned his communion. He answered that despite all his longing and pain of love, he had never received an answer. The voice said: "I am sent by Allah to give you an answer: The pain of love that He has put in your heart is the response."

We are seeking absolute certainty with our senses (*'aynu-l-yaqeen*) and with our heart (*'aynu-l-qalbi*) and with our mind (*'aynu-l-haqiq*). We are seeking this until there is no space between certainty and truth; the ego is gone and the source of our anxiety is only the separation we feel from the Divine. What we must remember is that we will not be certain, until we are certain. Until then, we must trust.

CUTTING THROUGH THE FOG

Sometime we feel this uncertainty, and we wonder if we really are on the path to freedom. We say to ourselves that "It certainly looks like those people over there are much more free, much more certain in their path." We tell ourselves that a different path, a different choice, or a different life would make us 'more free.' Just like in the story I shared, these are the whisperings of Shaytan; a fog rolls in to cloud our vision. We fall into many traps and we deceive ourselves. A person who mixes right with wrong and good with bad thinks they are free, but they are not going to ever truly be free. Often, we live in a kind of confusion. It's not that we have lack of faith in Allah, though we may think that we do because we are confused. But we begin to question our sense of truth or what is right, and become consumed by lack of resoluteness. I believe that anyone who has traversed that path has experienced that fog—*dabaab*.

What does a fog do? It hides things. So the truth, our capacities, our own ability to understand what this journey is and what life is, and what freedom is becomes concealed. Of course, when you are driving in a fog, if you use your bright beams, the light gets reflected back to you. The fog can blind us, and make it so we don't see. At times, we can hear the call of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'ala*) to us, and at times we don't. At times, we get a glimpse of the fog itself, and then the fog consumes us, veils us. It conceals what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is not true. We may think we are free or not free. We think we know what the whole truth of something is but we really don't. It is *mahjuub*, concealed, veiled, hidden. The question we must ask ourselves is are we going to embrace living in that *dabaab* or are we going to try to see through it, or better yet, burn it off with the *nuur* of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'ala*), the light of love, the light of truth, the light of our sincerity, which is manifest through our prayers, practices, *dhikr*, and service and submission? Allah says in the Holy Qur'an:

WA LAQAD KHALAQNĀ-L-ʾIŅSĀNA WA NAʾLAMU MĀ TUWASWISU BIHĪ NAFSUHU WA NAHNU AQRABU ILAYHI MIN ḤABLI-L-WARĪD.

We did indeed create the human being and We know what whispers in his soul, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein. (50:16)

The *Haqq* of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) has no veil. In the moment of nearness to Allah, nothing is concealed. We are, at times, confused and may be misdirected, confused by our own laziness or confused by our own reluctance. This is because we don't realize we are in this fog. We have managed to conceal from ourselves our arrogance and ignorance, our fears our confusions; yet, each one of those things can now haunt us. When we are quiet, and really reflect for a moment, we realize that those kinds of whispers are taunting us, testing us, and inviting us into the fog. It is very seductive, because with these whispers comes the attitude that we already are free. We outwardly articulate humility, but inwardly we are not humble. Somehow that *Shayṭan*, which doesn't want us to be free, promises us ease and *baseerah*/insight and *firaasa*.

When we feel this mental fog, we must stop and make sure we know where the path and road is. It is a time to pause and study yourself in the *siraata-l-mustaqeem*, with the knowledge that Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) is nearer than your jugular vein. You study yourself with the strength of your commitment, and with your practices. You arm yourself with *ṣabr*, and proceed carefully and honestly, just like you would when driving through fog. Do this until that fog dissipates as a result of the *Nuur-i-Allah* and *nuur-i-Muḥammad*.

A man once asked his Shaykh, "What is the nature of this concealment / fog? How do you know when you are in it, and how do you know when you are out of it? How do you know when you are traveling in the light of Allah (Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa)? How do you know when you are safe?" The Shaykh said the following,

"Let me ask you. Have you ever felt the compelling urge to rise and pray? Have you ever felt the desire to study the holy books? Have you ever felt ashamed because you were insensate? Have you ever felt embarrassed by your lack of gratitude to Allah (Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa)? Have you ever sensed your ignorance and told yourself, 'I must make a better use of my life?' Have you ever felt you don't study enough, or that you don't supplicate enough? Have you ever been asked or enticed to do something that you immediately felt was not right? Have you ever, in an instance, felt a deep longing for Allah?"

And the man said, "Of course! I have felt all these things at some time."

And the Shaykh said, "My son, these moments of lucidity, these moments of clarity, are the fadl/bounty/gift of Allah."

These moments are a glimpse of the *siraata-l-mustaqeem*, of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*). Those moments, when seized and developed, are gateways, a door (*baab*), through the mist and fog (*dabaab*). They are gateways of possibilities, of a life that is lived in the full view of the light of Allah.

The Shaykh went on to say, "But my son, the moments are rarely seized, and often we waste the gifts of Allah. We experience these moments but we hesitate. We experience these moments, but instead we listen to the voice saying, 'Perhaps what you thought was justice really is not that just. Perhaps what you thought was wrong is really not all that wrong. Perhaps what you felt in your heart was undignified is really not that bad. Perhaps what you sensed is ugly really is not all that ugly.' The voice asked you to doubt the call of your conscience, and my son, that is the fog. That is the anxiety and the confusion."

A wise person doesn't walk in confusion. We know it is normal to suffer these kinds of attacks and to fight the confusion, but if you have knowledge/*maʿrifah* and *hikmah*/wisdom, you pause and center yourself, and you pray until that confusion is lifted. You know that concealment, *hijaab*, will fall away, and it will be another gateway to the Divine.

*The Shaykh went on and said, "The problem my son is the more we stroll in the *dabaab*/fog, the more we are lost, and the more we inhabit the *dabaab*/fog, the more we stray."*

The truth is that none of us can really judge the intensity or thickness of that fog; and no person other than our self can know what is clear or not clear in our heart. So we have to recollect, reflect/*tafakkur*, and ask ourselves, "How

do I look in the eyes of Allah’s record of my life?” The more we reflect, the more we will know the truth. The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said, “**The discomforts of this earth are nothing like the embarrassments of the Hereafter.**” It’s a shame if we wait until that final day to think about all this.

CONCLUSION: 7 STAGES OF THE JOURNEY

So, as I end today, I remind you that the journey to freedom is a journey to perfection/perfect-ing. It is a journey with ups and downs, a journey where we sometime can see the goal in the distance, and at other times feel we will never reach it and wonder why we try. The Sufis speak about this journey to freedom in the inner as the journey through the seven stages of *nafs*. Sometimes, knowing the stages of the journey helps us to continue to persevere in our seeking, knowing others have traveled this road before us, and knowing that each station has its successes and failures, knowing that the fog will lift. So, in conclusion I will share with you a little about the last stages, as I have incorporated much of the previous four without numbering them earlier.

At the fifth stage of the contented soul, one becomes noticeably freer of human attributes, and becomes certain of this life’s purpose and of the journey to attain the *maqam* of one who is free. This, the next station and the final station must be experienced, and only a senior and well-experienced guide can take one through the morass, the highs and lows of this process. A seeker at this stage is immersed in the ocean of courtesy, as well as finding his prayers are answered. He /she is modest and makes no requests except when forced—honorable in the sight of other beings, respected by all, great and small, and educing nearness.

INNAKA-L-YAWMA LADAYNĀ MAKĪNUN AMĪN.

Today you are established firmly in Our favor and in Our trust. (12:54)

Occupying oneself with the name “*Hayy*” Alive, he/she is divesting themselves of their extinction (*fanaa*) and moving toward subsistence (*baqaa*) through the names and attributes: *al-Wahhab*, the One Who gives without being asked, *al-Fattah* (the Opener), the One Who opens the treasuries of His Mercy; *al-Wahid*, the One in Whose Essence there is no multiplicity; *al-Ahad* (the unique), the One Who can neither be divided or qualified; and *as-Samad* (the Self Sustaining), the One to Whom everyone turns for the fulfillment of all their wishes.

From here the return continues to the sixth *maqam*, where the soul is found pleasing, where all has been forsaken but Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*), where there is gentleness with others, leading them to righteousness, forgiving their misdeeds, loving them and feeling the inclination toward them to take them from the obscurities of their natural egotistic tendencies. Outwardly, one at this station is not distinguishable from other righteous beings, but this station is inwardly pleasing to Allah. Such a person keeps his promises, spends liberally when appropriate, withholds when appropriate, takes the middle course in all his affairs that lies between excess and deficiency, showing the first signs of *al-Khilafa al-Kubra*,

My bondsman continues to draw close to Me with nothing dearer to Me than what I have imposed upon him until I love him. And when I love him, I become the eye with which he sees, the ear with which he hears, the hand with which he strikes, and the foot with which he walks. (Hadith)

Having reached extinction in the previous station, and as a consequence rids him/herself of the distasteful human qualities, now, through self discipline and effort, Allah bestows His Generosity and gives the truth of certainty. The name associated with this station is *al-Qayyum* (the Sustainer), the One Who is constantly sustaining creation. Once one maintains the *adab* of *shareeah* and *tareeqah*, one moves toward what we have already spoken so much about: *insaanu-l-kaamil*. Having travelled *sayr illa-Llaah* (journey toward Allah), now one is travelling *sayr fi-Llaah* (journey in

Allah), then *sayr mina-Llaah* (journey from Allah), returning fulfilled with the attribute, *al-Qahhar* (the Compeller), Whose existence and example call people to the Divine. Here, the only desire is the pleasure of Allah.

This is our goal, and this is our journey. Just as things in this Universe are rarely linear, this journey is not a linear one, from station to station, but instead a process of refinement, of diving deeper and deeper each time, or of flying higher and higher; like the bird that wheels on the currents—spiraling higher and higher. At times we will see our goal and at times we will not. At times we will experience these stations, and in them, moments of true freedom; and at times we will not. What is important is the continual perseverance, the polishing and polishing of the mirror. This is the journey from the blameworthy attributes to the praiseworthy attributes; from ignorance and anger, envy and resentment, pride and arrogance, ego and illusions, love of name and power, the breaking of one's word and greed to knowledge, forbearance, inner purity, generosity, humility, gentility, patience, gratitude, reliance on Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*), love, contentment, truthfulness, concern and compassion for others. This is the path to freedom, the path of the Sufi.

CLOSING DU^CAA

Yaa Allah, liberate me from fear. Give me the wisdom to think positively; give me the courage to stand by the truth; give me the openness to connect to those who avoid me; give me a smile, a clean heart and a winning attitude that conquers others; give me the perspective that I need to remain satisfied with what You bless me with.

Wa Llahu lahu-l-haqqi wa huwa yahdis-sabeel.
 Hasbuna Llahu wahdahu wa niʿmal-wakeel.
 Wa salli ʿala sayyidina Muhammadin wa ahli wa sahbihii ajmaʿeen
 Wal-hamdu li-Llaahi Rabbi-l-ʿaalameen.

*Truth belongs to Allah (Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa); it is He who shows the way.
 Allah (Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa), alone, suffices us, and what a fine guardian is He!
 Blessings upon our Master Muhammad and all of his family and his companions,
 And praise to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.*