

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

[Choose to Be the Best One Can Be.](#)
Ask, “What do I do?” And Turn to Allah.

DVD title: (same)

Allah (swt) tells us in the Holy Qur’an:

Surely, I lead them astray, and surely, I will arouse desire in them, and surely, I will command them. And they slit the ears of the cows, and I will certainly command them to change the creation of Allah, and whoever takes Shaytan as a protector instead of Allah shall suffer a clear loss. He promises them and stirs up many desires in them, but Shaytan promises them nothing but deception. Those are they whose abode is hell, and they shall not find any escape from it. But as for those who believe and work goodness, we shall bring them into gardens beneath which rivers flow and they shall abide forever. It is a promise from Allah in truth, and who is more true than Allah in what he says?

The garden is neither attained by your wishful thinking, nor the wishful thinking of people of the Book. Whoever does wrong will be repaid for it, and will not find any protector nor helper besides Allah. And whoever does some good deeds, whether man or woman and is a believer, shall enter the Garden. And they will not be wronged so much as a speck on a date stone. Who is better in religion than one who surrenders his entire being to Allah and excels in all he does? And follows the creed of Ibrahim and turns away from all that is false, and Allah took Ibrahim as a friend. And to Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and what is in the earth, and it is Allah who uncovers all things. (4:119-126)

Also, Allah says in Surah al-A'raf:

Those who deny our signs and are arrogant toward them shall not have the gates of heaven open for them. Nor will they enter the garden until the camel passes through the eye of the needle, and that is how we will repay the evil doers. (7:40-41)

Sometimes one might find it hard to relate oneself to such statements, because we don't think of ourselves as deniers of signs, or certainly as evil doers. Allah (swt) says later in Surah al-A'raf:

...“Praise be to Allah who has guided us for we certainly would not have found the right Path unless Allah had guided us. And surely the Messengers of Allah came to us with the truth.” It will be proclaimed to them, “Behold the Garden! You have been made its inheritors on account of what you did.” And the Companions of the Garden will call to the companions of the fire, “We have found that which our Lord promised us to be true. Have you also found that which your Lord promised you to be true?” And they will say, “Yes.” Then a crier between them will cry out, “The curse of Allah is on the unjust oppressors who turned others away from the path of Allah and who seek to make it seem crooked and who cover up the truth about the final life.” (7:43-45)

Not only do we not see ourselves as people who do not see the signs, but we don't see ourselves as people whose actions turn others away from the path. Those are always somebody else, not us. We are the observers from the outside, and somehow, these things don't seem to apply to us. We appear to have all these kinds of choices in life. When you

think about the choices you think you have in life, they are very rarely the ones you really have in life. Except for a couple of people in this room, you were born an American. You had no choice. So you will always be an American. Or you are born Egyptian or Ethiopian or Ghanian or Persian. You had no choice in that. The question is what is it you will do with that? It's not like you sit there and have this choice. You can become a Canadian, but you will still be born in America. I could go to Egypt and maybe get Egyptian citizenship, and people would say, "What are you?" "I'm Egyptian." "No, what were you before that?"

A person is born what they are. If you are born into this community, that's what you are. If you are born a Muslim, you're a Muslim. If you were born into a family of Sufis, well guess what? That's it. Now the question is what are you going to do with it? You don't have any choice about that. My children may wish they had the choice that their father wasn't a *shaykh* or something, but you don't have any choice. What do you do with that? These are all blessings of Allah (swt). You can't stand outside of it, and say, "I'm going to re-do that. I'm going to get born again as somebody or something else." It doesn't work that way. What do you do with the gift you have been given? If you start denying that, then you have to deny Allah.

The simplest test I tell people is if you deny the existence of Allah, then go out and pick a flower; pull all the petals off of it, and put it back together again. You can't do that. Go design something more beautiful. You can't do that. The idea of choice is a very interesting concept. When we think about the admonitions, encouragements and prohibitions, we stand outside of them and look at them. Sin for one person is not the same as sin for someone else. It may be true on some levels, but certainly not at the absolute level. This is a big lesson. The subject of the lesson is what is the nearest and dearest and what is most important to our own self? For the spiritual person and for the ego-driven person, it is always the self.

For the ego-driven person, the most important thing to them is “my self!” For the spiritual person, it is the evolution of the self. For the spiritual person, the evolution of the self in regard of the fact that this self comes from Allah (swt). The awareness of our self is coming from Allah. The only way to replace the love we have for our self (in the selfish or ego sense), and put it behind the love of Allah (swt) is to know how to behave toward our self. Allah says in Qur’an: **“What can be better in religion than one who submits?”** The one who submits his whole self to Allah and follows the way of Sidna Ibrahim in true faith is the example. Then you hear the warnings that I read.

No one likes to go to a *khutbah* and hear the *khatib* always talking about hell, that everybody’s going to hell. The flames of hell are going to lick up and burn the hair off your arm, your feet, and your eyebrows. People like to go hear about Jannah. At the same time, we have to understand the responsibility we have towards our self and others is not to scare people, but to create some sense of truth, of piety, a kind of *khawf* / fear that comes from fear of doing wrong, a real understanding of what it means against the backdrop of all the blessings we have. Allah has given us blessings. A Muslim believes that his or her happiness in this world and the next is determined clearly and understandably by our discipline, by the way we train and direct ourselves, by our example, and by how we direct our children to be better people.

It is not to settle for our self or those we love to be anything but the best they can be. We purify and refine ourselves. This is foremost in the heart and mind of a Muslim, not in the mind of a *kafir* or *munafiq*. How can I be the best that I can be, not just get away with the minimum? A Muslim or *mu’min* knows that their unhappiness comes about by spoiling things, desecrating things, being disrespectful—not just to Allah (swt), but also to themselves; not just to themselves, but also to those who love them; not just to those who love them, but to those who guide them, their teachers, their parents, their *shaykh*,

their brothers and sisters. Because we are the best of Allah's creation, the best is expected of us. If you give me a gift of something beautiful (thank you very much) and I break it on purpose, I'm not just desecrating that antique vase; I'm desecrating the giver. I'm being disrespectful to the giver of it. If I accidentally drop it, that's something different. Maybe I wasn't careful enough. I'm making a comment on the giver. This is based on the evidence of these *surahs*:

Verily, man is at a loss except for those who believe and do righteous deeds and recommend one another to the truth that Allah has ordained, and abstain from all kinds of sins and evil deeds that Allah has forbidden, and recommend one another to patience.

Do you know of any problem in your life, in the life of a friend or family, or some friend or someone you have heard about, that doesn't find an answer in this *surah*? There is no evil deed or sin, or act of intentional wrong-doing, that doesn't leave a person at loss. Yet, we cannot act for others; we can only act for ourselves.

The Prophet (sal) said, "All of you – all of you – will enter Paradise except for those of you who refuse." They said, "O Messenger! Who refuses?" He said, "Whoever obeys me enters Paradise. Whoever disobeys me has refused." He also said, "All men go out in the morning selling themselves, thereby setting themselves free or destroying themselves."

That's what you do all day long: sell yourselves. For what? You know the word: *ba'iat*. It means to sell. Who is it you are giving your *ba'iat* to? Are you giving your *ba'iat* to your job? Are you selling yourself to corrupt people? Are you selling yourself to corrupt politicians or business people or corrupt friends, or to someone who is a disbeliever, or to someone who wants only something from you? Or are you giving your

ba'iat to Allah, and letting Allah (swt) introduce you at the right time, to the right people, in the right place, in the right way, for the right money, for the right work, for the righteousness of life? Who are you giving *ba'iat* to? Every day we are giving it.

Someone says, "O Shaykh, I gave *ba'iat* to you 25 years ago." *Alhamdulillah*. And in those years, 365 days a year times 25, you have given *ba'iat* to whom, to what? Do you think it is only one time? We see people who sell religion in the only way they can sell it: politicians sell it every day, voting in Congress. They use religion. They sell religion to scare people. They trade one religion against another in order to cause fear and anxiety. Whatever they call it, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Truth, they are trying to sell a product. But if you put a real value on the value of your own self, a real value on faith and on truth, a real value on belief, a true value that Allah (swt) puts on love, patience, compassion and mercy, and recognize its face in all these religions and names, you realize the *Dīn* of Islam is really one that explains it the best. It truly has, because it has encompassed all the others. Then you give *ba'iat* to that, and those who represent that as the guide to it, then that's Sufism and that's Islam.

You can't be a Sufi without being a Muslim. You can't be a Muslim without trusting in Allah. You can't trust in Allah unless you are patient, and you open your eyes and see. You can't be patient until you understand the pain of impatience and the loss of impatience. You can't explain that until you love for your brother and sister what you love for yourself. Love for yourself what you have, only if others have what you would love to have them have. A Muslim believes what purifies or cleanses his or her soul is the beauty of faith and the beauty of good deeds—not mediocre deeds, not just being nice to someone who happens to be in your immediate circle, or in your community, or comes into your store, or is your co-worker. It's the good deeds that count.

The aspect which destroys the soul is the evil of disbelief and disobedience. What makes a good Muslim are these things; the same things that make a good human being. Automatically, that's what makes a believer. What destroys the soul is the evil of disbelief and disobedience. It is what makes us pause and hesitate, thinking that 'what I have is sufficient,' and 'who I am is complete.' Allah (swt) says, **“Perform *salat* at the two ends of the day and in some hours of the night. Truly the good deeds remove the evil deeds.”** What happens? If you do this, that happens. If you don't do this, something else happens. You might not see it right away. The sky isn't going to open up, and lightning bolts are not going to come down and strike you dead if you miss a prayer. If you miss the next one and the next one and the next one, your attitude changes and you become disrespectful and disobedient, distrustful and not trustworthy. The Prophet (sal) said,

When a believer commits a sin, a black spot is dotted on their heart. And if he leaves that deed and repents, his heart is cleansed of that spot. If he continues such acts, the covering increases over his heart until his heart is covered completely. This is the rust that is mentioned in Qur'an when Allah (swt) says, “Nay, but on the heart is a covering of sin and evil deeds, which they used to earn.”

It grows slowly. Just think about it: you have grapes. They are nice, fresh, delicious grapes. You let them sit out. Slowly they get mold on them, and they ferment. Now something that was beautiful and *halal* becomes *haram*. It's the same thing. Something that was pure and clean becomes covered with rust. What happened? We weren't attentive. We knew that would happen if we left the grapes out. Again, the Prophet (sal) said,

“Have fear of Allah and obey Him wherever you are. And follow up an evil deed with a good deed; it wipes it away.” The assumption is there are going to be evil deeds, mistakes, errors and sins. Then he says, **“And behave with people with a good behavior.”** *What* do you do? This is *what* you do to overcome them. *Why?* We’ll talk about that in another month. This is what you do. The instructions are clear. Because of that, a Muslim is always trying to live in a state where he/she is refining their soul, purifying it, cleansing themselves, having good *adab* toward their own self. A good Muslim is one who first refines him/herself. More than that, they are a good human being. Why do I say, “more than that”? You could say less than that; but they are more recognized as a good human being. Forget the name Muslim for a second. A good person is a good Muslim. A bad person is not a good Muslim. He or she keeps from everything that ruins or spoils or corrupts it, whether it be false or apparently true, whether it is evil beliefs or impure speech or wrong actions, selfish desires, justifications, whether conscious and intentional or unconscious and unintentional.

Day and night, a Muslim, a believer, a seeker, a good person becomes a knower by this *at-tazkiyat*/purification. One becomes a knower by purifying and educating themselves. If they are educated, then they don’t forget who they are. All of these are based on Qur’an. He or she, day or night, holds account of themselves, makes *muhasabat*, encourages themselves to do good deeds, pushes themselves to obey, acts in a disciplined, respectful way, surrounds themselves with good people, turns away from evil in order to purify and make their heart, soul and words wholesome. And their actions will then be wholesome, and their relationships will be wholesome. When something wrong happens, they repent. They make *tawbah*. What is meant by this is to eventually cease all acts of disobedience and thereby cease all sins.

Along the way, we have to encourage ourselves, allow ourselves and, at times, force ourselves to repent, to feel remorse for every wrong action, every wrong word, every

wrong attitude, every wrong thought, everything that trespasses on another person's heart and soul and causes them pain and suffering, for everything that counters what is in the Qur'an or in the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammed (sal). That's what we have to do. We have to allow ourselves to worry even a little bit about the past, and have really strong conviction not to return to those wrong actions in the present or in the future. **“O you who believe! Turn to Allah with sincere repentance. It may be that your Lord will expiate you from your sins, and admit you to the gardens underneath which rivers flow.”** *The Prophet (sal) said, “O people! Repent to Allah. Truly, I repent to Allah a hundred times a day.”* That's what you do.

“I don't know what to do! I don't know how to overcome this! I'm having these thoughts, these feelings. I'm having these desires and fears. This is a difficult time for me.” This is what you do. You don't stand aside and say, “This is what everybody else does but me. That's not what I do. I can't do that!” That's the whole point, isn't it? ‘I can't do that’ is the whole point of this whole *khutbah*. Of course, you can. You might not be able to do it with a little bit of effort; you might have to make a lot of effort. You don't have to have total 100% knowledge in order to do anything, or 100% belief to believe something, do you? Do you have to have 100% knowledge to make a decision? Of course not—nobody has. If that was the case, we'd still be beating each other over the head with clubs instead of with nuclear weapons. Nobody has 100% sureness.

The Prophet said, “100 times a day”? Wow, only a hundred times a day? If we could see our minds and what was happening in the apparent front part of our brains, we would be repenting every second. “Hello. I'm sorry.” “Hello. I'm sorry.” The Prophet (sal) said, **“Whoever repents before the sun rises from its rest, Allah will forgive him.”** What does it mean? It means at night. **“Allah (swt) stretches out His hands to one who repents for sins committed in the night until the daytime.”** And for those who commit sins in the day to the night time, this is a way to purify ourselves. It's a way to

behave toward ourselves. It doesn't mean the next morning you get up and do it all over again.

The next thing is we have to be very, very watchful. We have to be very much on guard, because a Muslim makes his soul realize that she/he is being watched by Allah (swt)—*ihsan*. Adhering to the belief and understanding that the goal, every moment of our life, is to become absolutely certain that Allah (swt) is seeing everything we are doing, knows all of our secrets, watches all of our actions, and that Allah (swt) will judge that person. What does that mean? In the idiom I usually speak, it means that compassion is not a thing. Compassion is a consciousness. Peace is a consciousness. Love is a consciousness. Truth is a consciousness. Justice is a consciousness. It's living: the living God, the living Truth, the living Qur'an, or the living Islam. That's what that means.

Every soul shall receive what they have earned. It is not something we should fear as much as we should look forward to. It is to inspire us to do good and to repent of what we have been doing wrong. What does it take to do that? To look, to see against the background of some kind of a scale, some kind of a measurement. Metrics didn't begin in the late 20th century as an art; it started at the beginning of the awareness that there is God and there are human beings (or Truth and human beings). Among the actions that Allah (swt) will judge is our intention and effort, not just our failures. If we say, "It's too late for me. That's all I deserve. I am a lousy person and I do lousy things. So I accept the fact that I'm a lousy person and that's it," that's *haram*. Giving up is *haram*. What's your intention? Fail a thousand times. "*Come, come, join my caravan, even if you have failed a thousand times,*" Rumi says.

With this understanding, a person becomes filled with awe, recognizing the greatness and the perfection of Allah (swt). You also feel pleasure, and welcome the remembrance. As

you remember Allah (swt), those spots are removed from the heart. In that *dhikru-Llāh*, you don't have to worry so much about wrong actions, because you are remembering in that moment—thoughts, words, intentions. You might become annoyed because some thought enters into your mind, but you become annoyed. So you are rejecting it. First, you have to clean the slate and keep it clean. When we wrestle with day-to-day life and worry about what will happen tomorrow, or worry about what came before or what came after, and when there is some kind of fear of the Hereafter, we can really find happiness in obedience to Allah, to his Prophet, and to those who guide us. We become anxious and closer to Allah, turning to Allah and turning away from other things.

Anxiety has a purpose. A person who is a drunkard finds it very hard to turn away from drink. A person who is a drinker who falls in love with someone who says, "Please, for my sake, stop" finds it easier to turn away from the drink. Love allows that to happen.

“Who can be better in the *dīn* than one who submits his face and himself to Allah? Whomsoever submits his face to Allah while he is a doer of good, he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold, and He sees you even if you don't see Him. He knows you, even if you don't know Him.” What's the point? The point is, if you allow yourself to love Allah (swt), to really love being compassionate and merciful and kind and just and truthful and those who are that way, then it is easier for you to overcome your own sins, and not feel like you are being caught or watched.

This is the basis of *mutaqīn*, which is the basis of *taqwa*, protection. We need protection. We were born inherently good, but our hearts are drawn towards that which is questionable and evil sometimes. Our predecessors followed the way of repentance and purification to the point where they reached a level of *yaqīn*/certainty, in a state that was so close to Allah. Hear what they had to say. Al Junayd was asked, “*What can help to lower one's gaze?*” Again, there is the question “what?” He said, “*By your knowledge that the One Who is looking at you is preceding your look at which you are looking at.*”

And Sufi al-Araf said, *“You should be watching over yourself from the One from whom nothing is hidden. You should also have hope in the One Who has power in fulfilling all your hopes, and you should be cautious for the One Who has power to punish.”*

There is a story that one of the pious ones passed a group who were shooting arrows. One person was sitting at a distance from them. He came to them and wanted to speak to them, and he said, “Remembering Allah is more desirable to me.” The man said, “You, by yourself?” The man said, “With me are my Lord and two angels.” He said, “Of those people, who is the winner?” He said, “The one whom Allah has forgiven.” Then he asked him, “Where is the path?” He pointed to the sky, and he stood and left.

The story is related that Zuleikha came to Sidna Yusef to entice him. She covered the face of her idol. He said, *“What’s wrong with you? Are you ashamed before the watchful eye of something that is dead and lifeless, while you are not ashamed before the watchful eye of the All-Powerful King?”*

This is how we deceive ourselves. Unless we make *muhasabat* and really take it seriously, we will be wandering around, repenting a little (not enough), performing actions that will be sometimes good and sometimes bad, will not be good for us. We will not treat others as we wish to be treated. We will be concerned about what other people think about us or feel, and we will be totally unaware that it is not that which we should be concerned with. It’s what Allah (swt) thinks of us that we should be concerned with. We know *that* by knowing what is in the Qur’an, and what has come through the words of the Prophet, and what we know in the core of our heart to be the truth.

Asalaamu aleykum.

