

WHAT



WHAT

Shaykh Ahmed Abdu-r-Rashid  
at the Zaawiya of Shaykh Nooruddeen Durkee  
CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA  
30 October 2011  
Part 1 of a 5 part series

---

*Bismi-Llaabi-r-Rahmaani-r-Raheem*

Surah al Fatihah

AL-HAMDU-LI-LLĀHI, MUQALIBA-L-QULŪBI WA-L-ABSĀR.  
ALLĀHUMMA ThABIT QULŪBANA °ALA SIRĀTIKA-L-QAWĪM,  
WA-J°ALNĀ LI-WAJHIKA MUTTAJIHĪN,  
WA SALLI °ALA-Sh-ShAFI°I-L-HABĪB,  
RAHMATIL-°ĀLAMĪN,  
WA MANĀRI-L-NAJIYĪN, WA MARSĀ-L-°ĀRIFĪN

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 °INDA-Sh-ShADĀĀ°IDI  
YĀ KhAFIYYA-L-LUTFI, YĀ LATĪFA-S-SUN°I  
YĀ HALĪMAN, LĀ YA°JILUQDI HĀJATĪ

**BI-RAḤMATIKA, YĀ ARḤAMA-R-RĀHIMĪN.  
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-ḤAMDU-LI-LLĀH**

**ALLĀHUMMA ṢALLI WA ṢALLIM ʿALĀ SAYYIDINĀ MUḤAMMADIN, WA ʿALĀ ĀĀLIHI WA ṢAḤBIH**

## INTRODUCTION

This is a series that is structured around five questions: What? Why? Who? Where? and When? Inshaa’a-Llaah through these talks we will answer some of these questions, as they apply to Islam, Sufism, and your lives. More importantly, I hope this series will provide you with ways to think about your own questions—to address them, by developing the inner capabilities and outer practices that will increase your spiritual capacity and your relationship with Allah (*Subḥānahu wa taʿālaa*), and to refine the means to approach the Divine Presence.

To understand the question “what” is important as it establishes the foundation for the many questions that follow, questions like: Who seeks to enter the Path of Sufism? Why would one pursue a path? When is it appropriate to seek guidance? and, Where does one turn to find the answers to the pressing questions of life. These and a myriad of other questions relating to practices, relationships, behavior... all begin with the question of “what.”

The kinds of questions that come from “what?” are questions like: What is the purpose of religion? What is the purpose of spirituality? What is belief? What is faith? What is Sufism? What is the path? What are the practices? What is *tareeqah*? What are the reasons to choose a path? What is the role of the Shaykh? What is the relationship with the murshid and the mureed? What are the qualities of a seeker? What are the signs of a spiritual individual? What is the purpose of life? What am I doing with my life? What is my destiny am I really able to fulfill it? Many of these questions have been addressed singly in the past series; today we begin anew, in another format to relook at the core of this journey of life on the Path of awakening, the Path of Sufism.

These questions illustrate the natural inclination of the human being to ask questions, and to frame our lives and our choices around questions and answers, or at least *ishaarat*—pointing in the right direction.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT IS THE ROLE OF QUESTIONING?

If we turn to Qur'an, we see it is filled with questions for its readers (and also with answers). Allah is constantly in a dialogue with us, through the questions and words of the Qur'an. Listen to just a few of the questions He asks us:

**LAW NASHĀA'U JA'ALNĀHU UJĀJANĀ FA-LAWLĀ TASHKURŪN?**

**If We willed, We could make it bitter, so why are you not grateful? (56:70)**

**... YUKHRIJU-L-HAYYA MINA-L-MAYYITI WA MUKHRIJU-L-MAYYITI MINA-L-HAYYI. DhĀLIKUMU-LLĀHU. FA-ANNĀ TU'FAKŪN?**

**...it is He who brings the living from the dead and brings the dead from the living. Such is Allah; so why then are you deluded? (6:95)**

And in Surah at-Tawba

---

<sup>1</sup> (The Master [al-Qushayri (d. 465/1074) in *Lata'if al-isharat*] said, "**Guide us on the straight path**, namely, eliminate from us the darkness of our states, so that we can become illuminated by the lights of Your sanctity and leave behind having been overshadowed by the shadows of our seeking. And raise from us the shadow of our striving, so that we can gain vision by the stars of Your generosity and find You through You." [from Qushayri, *Lata'if al-isharat*, ed. Basyuni, vol. 1, p. 50] )

## WHAT

YĀ AYYUHĀ-LLADHĪNA ĀMANŪ, MĀ LAKUM IDHĀ QĪLA LAKUMU INĤFIRŪ FĪ SABĪLI-LLĀHI ITh-ThĀQALTUM ILĀ-L-'ARD? ARADĪTUM BI-L-HAYĀTI-D-DUNYĀ MINA-L-'ĀKHIRAH? FA-MĀ MATĀ'U-L-HAYĀTI-D-DUNYĀ FI-L-'ĀKHIRATI ILLĀ QALĪL?

**O you who believe! What is the matter with you, that when you are called to go forth in the Way of Allah you cling heavily to the earth? Are you pleased with the life of this world rather than the Hereafter? What is the enjoyment of the life of the world [compared] to the Final Life, save a little? (9:38)**

Since none of us have ever seen the Final Life, how can we answer this question? And yet, Allah is asking us, modeling for us a mode of thought, of reflection and contemplation, of looking beyond the surface into the deeper meanings. Again, in Qur'an, the question is used to emphasize and to ask us the questions we should be asking ourselves. In Surah al-Ambiyaa:

WA 'ALLAMNĀHU SAN'ATA LABŪSIL-LAKUM LITUH̄SINAKUM MIM BA'SIKUM; FA-HAL AŤTUM SHĀKIRŪN?

**And We taught him the making of garments to protect you from your violence; so then will you be thankful?** (21:80)

Or in Surah al-A'raf:

DĀRU-L-'ĀKHIRATU KHAYRUL-LI-LLADHĪNA YATTAQŪNA. AFALĀ TA'QILŪN?

**...The home of the Final Life is better for those who guard themselves [for Allah]. Will you not use [your] intelligence?** (7:169)

“Why are you not grateful?” “Will you be thankful?” “Will you not use your intelligence?” These are questions repeated to us over and over in Qur'an. And from these *aayaat*, we can begin to get a sense of how Allah presents things. This pattern reflects the innate human desire to learn, to know, to understand. We have, as part of our creative intellectual capability, this incessant or inherent desire to ask questions: “What is the purpose of life?” “What is my place in this world?” “What is wrong...?” “What can I do about it?” “What should I do?” All these question and more I asked at the beginning of my journey. Although, most people put the question of “why was I created?” aside after some small reflection about it, it's very critical for human beings to seek out the answers to these questions. Without these questions and knowledge of these answers, human beings are not much different than animals. Do you think a cow or a donkey asks, “What is the meaning of life?” Only human beings have been given this unique ability to question and and the choice to follow the answers we find or not. This profound significance of the process of question and response is reflected in the first question we were ever asked: “AM I NOT YOUR LORD?”

## WHAT

...

**WA'IDh AKHADhA RABBUKA MIM BANĪ ĀDAMA ... DhURRIYYATAHUM WA ASh-HADAHUM 'ALĀ AÑFUSIHIM, "ALASTU BIRABBIKUM?" QĀLŪ, "BALĀ SHAHIDNĀ..."**

**And Remember when your Lord took form the children of Adam...their descendants, and made them testify of themselves, saying, "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, Surely we bear witness to that..." (7:172).**

Why didn't Allah say to us: "I AM YOUR LORD"? Instead, from the very beginning, we are asked to engage, interact, to reflect, to use our intellect. A dialogue between the Creator and the created sets the stage for continuing dialogue between creation and the creatures/human beings, who represent ultimately the Will of Allah (*Subḥānahu wa ta'ālaa*) in Allah's creation. But we see that human beings have constantly misused what Allah has given us: our intelligence, our intellect, our knowledge. Human beings are constantly degrading their capability, or seeing the capability as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Our ability to question is a tool for understanding and reflection, not an end in itself. It is not enough to simply be someone who questions, a skeptic; we must also be someone who listens, accepts, who responds and submits, recognizing the truth in the right answers as they come to us from within and without—listening to understand, to learn and to utilize for our own evolution and fulfillment.

**WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?**

With that introduction, I will begin to attempt to address the first of the "what" questions. Implanted in every individual's heart is the most fundamental "what" question: What am I doing here? What is the purpose (or meaning) of life?

If we look at this the world as it is now – the choices people make, the way we act, the things we value – and use this to extrapolate the purpose of life, we would get a very strange message. We see that people have become "dumbed down." Their minds and abilities have been, are often either wasted or put to questionable, if not wrong or destructive, uses. Deceived and manipulated by distractions, ersatz pleasures, numbing economic and social forces, the average person does the minimum to survive and just to have some semblance of peace in their home and life. For many, even that comfort has been taken away. It has become accepted behavior to take drugs and to drug people. Cheating others, self-objectification, self-aggrandizement have become de rigueur (normal and acceptable). We are abandoning the values of universal education, the health and well-being, relative equality, and relationships built on trust and love between neighbors, family members, colleagues and friends.

What we see are people who live their lives without real purpose or direction; or only for material gain. Without knowledge of the purpose of life, human existence loses its meaning; consequently, we see that lives are wasted. The reward of what we would call an eternal life, life beyond this life, happiness in the Hereafter, is gone. It's destroyed by the myopia of materialism, consumerism, individualism, and cynicism; thus, it is of the utmost importance for us as human beings to both ask and to answer the questions, "What is life and why am I here?" "What is the purpose of Allah's creation?"

How do we find the answers to these questions? Usually, our habit is to turn to other human beings for the answers. But the only place where real, clear, and precise answers can be found is in the revealed texts and the teachings of the Prophets (*salla-Llaabu 'alayhi wa sallam*). Allah reveals the purpose to human beings through the *ambiyaa'*, through his Prophets, because human beings have shown themselves to be incapable of arriving at and retaining the correct

answers for themselves in a consistent way. The prophets of Allah taught their followers the answers to the questions of what, why, who and how, and they accrue to us.

What is the purpose of life? Long before we were born we knew the answer, when we were asked, “Am I not your Lord?” Belief is imprinted on every human soul because Allah took all the souls ever to be born and brought them before Him and asked a question and our souls made this covenant to worship and serve Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*).

**INNĀ ʿARADNĀ-L-ʿAMĀNATA ʿALĀ-S-SAMĀWĀTI WA-L-ʿARDI WA-L-JIBĀLI FA-ABAYNA AŅY-YAHMILNAHĀ WA  
ASHFAQNA MINHĀ WA ḤAMALAHĀ-L-ʿIŅSĀNU INNAHU KĀNA DḤALŪMAŅ JAHŪLĀ**

**Surely, We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains and they refused to bear it and feared from it, and man bore it. Surely he is ever unjust, ignorant. (33:72)**

Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) again answers the question simply and succinctly when He says in Surah az-Zariyat:

**WA MĀ KHALAQTU-L-JINNA WA-L-ʿIŅSA ILLĀ LIYAʿBUDŪN.**

**I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me. (51:56)**

The rewards of worship, the forms of worship are detailed in such *ayat* as:

**FA-DḤKURŪNĪ ADḤKURKUM**

**Remember Me and I will remember you. (2:152)**

Where do you worship? As we know from the *hadith qudsi*: “...if you want to find Me, look for Me inside the heart of the believer.” And when do we worship?

...YADhKURŪNA-LLĀHA QIYĀMAÑW-WA QU°ĪDAÑW-WA °ALĀ JUNŪBIHIM.

“ ... celebrate Allah's praises, standing, sitting, and lying on your sides. (3:191)

All this tells us what life's purpose is. Allah clearly answers this question, telling us that we were created to worship Him. And by extension, the purpose of life is to fulfill our word, our promises made long ago to serve and worship Allah and to fulfill the *amaanaat*. Out of this comes honor, loyalty, rule of law, civic duty, and spiritual gratitude. Some call this “seeking the pleasure of Allah.”

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO WORSHIP?

There is a profound simplicity in these statements, but for many of us, simple statements also prompt us to dig deeper with more ‘what’ questions: “What am I supposed to do with that knowledge?” “What does it really mean to worship Allah?” And “What is ‘Allah’s pleasure?’” Answers to these questions come from a deeper place, from our desire to understand. Indeed, it these questions that first hint at inwardly wanting to fulfill our role in the *amaanaat*. How do we stay with this consciousness and develop it to the point of that it becomes our essential core purpose, our default? To develop this is to develop our ability to worship, *‘ibaadah*. Certainly, we know that Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*) is not in need of our worship. If not a single being in the universe worshiped Allah, it would not diminish Allah in any way. If all humankind worshiped Allah, it would not increase Allah in any way. He alone exists without any needs. So then, what does it mean to worship Allah? Allah says in Surah an-Nasr:

FA-SABBIH BIHAMDI RABBIKA WA-STAGhFIRHU.

Glorify the praises of your Lord and seek His Forgiveness. (110:3)

Does this mean only literally praising Allah with our mouth and our words? It means that and much more. In glorifying Allah, we are choosing to be in harmony with the rest of creation, which naturally glorifies Allah: all the trees, all the birds, the wind—everything created by Allah glorifies Allah. As He tells us in Surah al-Israa:

TUSABBIHU LAHU-S-SAMĀWĀTU-S-SAB°U WA-L-’ARDU WA MAÑ FĪHINNA WA’IM-MIÑ SHAY’IN ILLĀ YUSABBIHU BIHAMDIHI WA LĀKIL-LĀ TAFQAHŪNA TASBĪHAHUM...

The seven heavens and the earth and all that is within them glorify Him, and there is nothing which does not glorify His praise. But, you do not understand their glorification... (17:44)

## WHAT

There are many types of worship – types we understand and types we do not. There are also those who think they understand what it means to glorify Allah, but really only glorify themselves. This is the worship of those who are proud of their worship. They dress for worship, but it is for themselves; they bow down to their own image, their own goodness, their own cleverness. This kind of worship is really self-worship. Self-worshippers can't be worshippers of Allah. This kind of worshipper is filled with pride – pride in their spirituality, their religiosity, and their austerities – always comparing themselves with others.

**WA QĀLA RABBUKUMU UD-‘ŪNĪ ASTAJIB LAKUM INNA-LLADHĪNA YASTAKBIRŪNA ‘AN ‘IBĀDATĪ SAYADKHULŪNA JAHANNAMA DĀKHIRĪN**

**Your Lord says, “Call Me—I will answer you. But those who are too proud to worship Me will certainly enter Jahannam—disgraced. (40:60)**

*Ibn Arabi said: How many there are who walk upon the earth, and the earth curses them! How many there are who prostrate themselves upon her, and she rejects them! How many there are who invoke God, yet their words go no further than their lips, their thoughts no further than their mind. These people act for the sake of others, yet calculate what they themselves will get out of it. How many beloved friends of God are to be found in synagogues and churches! How many hated enemies of God are to be found doing their prayers and in mosques!*

We strive for a different type of worship, worship that becomes part of our nature, worship that is full of humility and remembrance. This is the worship of a person who remembers that:

**FA-AYNAMĀ TUWALLŪ FA-ThAMMA WAJHU-LLĀH.**

**Wheresoever you turn there is the countenance of Allah. (2:115)**

This type of worshipper is consistent and constant, seeing Allah in everything and remembering Allah in every moment. So often in life we are like the people Allah describes in Surah Yunus, remembering Him only when we have a need.

**...IDhĀ KUŅTUM FI-L-FULKI WA JARAYNA BIHIM BIRĪHĪN TAYYIBATIŅW-WAFARIHŪ BIHĀ JĀA’AT’HĀ RĪHUN ‘ĀSIFUŅW-WA JĀA’AHUMU-L-MAWJU MIŅ KULLI MAKĀNIŅW-WADhANNŪ ANNAHUM UHĪTA BIHIM DA‘AWŪ**

## WHAT

ALLĀHA MUKHLIṢĪNA LAHU-D-DĪNA LA'IN AÑJAYTANĀ MIN HĀDHIHI LANAKŪNANNA MINA-SH-SHĀKIRĪN. FALAMMĀ AÑJĀHUM IDHĀ HUM YABGHŪNA FI-L-'ARDI BIGHAYRI-L-HAQQ...

... when you are in the ships and they are sailing with a fair breeze and the [passengers] are glad within them, there comes a storm-wind, and the waves come upon them from everywhere, and the [passengers] assume they are overwhelmed in them; then they call you to Allah, making their faith pure for Him along, [saying] “If you deliver us from this, [then] truly we will be of the thankful!” Yet as soon as He saves them they act outrageously on earth, without [any] right... (10:22-23)

The self-centered attitude described in these *ayat* is, unfortunately, probably more familiar to us than we would like to admit. An act of worship that is actuated by self-interest is not only a deviation from the path of devotion to Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*), it is putting oneself in comparison with Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) and creating duality. Worship that is motivated by self-interest denies the Unity of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*), the Unity of His Attributes and His Intentions. The Qur'an proclaims the Unity of Allah and denies the existence of anything that can be associated or partnered with Allah.

LĀ TUDRIKUHU-L-'ABSĀRU WA HUWA YUDRIKU-L-'ABSĀRA. WA HUWA-LLATĪFU-L-KHABĪR.

No vision can comprehend Him, whilst He comprehends all vision. He is the unfathomably Subtle, the Aware One. (6:103)

How can we overcome this inherent trend toward self-centered worship? The only way is by living life in a way that is fulfilling our *fitrah* (essential goodness). We can begin by setting our intention and purpose to be a kind and pious individual of good character and upright nature. Setting that intention, with sincerity, is in itself a form of worship. Along with that, it is necessary to have apprehension and fear, *taqwah* and *khanf*, lest we lose the concern and respect for our Creator and the value of our own life.

### WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OR STAGES OF WORSHIP?

So we began with the question about the meaning of life, which lead us to the guidance to worship and serve Allah. Within this idea of worship, there are different levels of worship. The first of these is to worship out of fear of Hell or desire for Paradise. While this is accepted by Allah, such an individual has not yet developed the understanding that worship is in itself beneficial and that its benefits accrue to one who worships with sincerity. The difference between these two types of worship is the difference between looking through a window and opening a window; the open window brings in the breeze, the light, the smells and sounds that are all already there. There are those (as I described earlier) who only take the time to “look” out that metaphorical window when they are in need.

We might also ask, “What is the difference between self-serving worship and worship in which we are asking for something (like making *du'aa* for the healing of a friend, or asking Allah to make our way easy)?” The answer brings us to the second kind of worship, worship in which we are turning to

## WHAT

Allah, as part of a pattern of regular remembrance. We are coming with an open and pure heart, with humility and gratitude, gratitude for the problem, as an opportunity to remember Allah abundantly, and gratitude for the answer, whatever the answer is. We are remembering the Unity of Allah, and that the problem, the answer, the question, the struggle are all from Allah, in Allah, by Allah. In this second kind of supplication there is a surrender, an opening up that allows the breeze (that is always there) to come in. In this worship we are opening up to the healing, the light, the truth, clarity, the *madad* (assistance), the *md'iyat* (accompaniment) that is there. With this worship you are turning your attention away from what it was on (yourself, your problem, your emotions), and toward what it needs to be on. Then, you are quiet and patient. To worship in this way is refining the expression of the ego.

This is the foundation of **third type** of worship, worship that is done for the sake of Allah, for the sake of love, for the sake of patience.... What is this love we are talking about? Love is believing in what's outside the window. It is trusting and submitting. This is the worship (*'ibaadah*) of free people. Something that you love attracts you; you are drawn to it. To worship for the sake of Allah is to worship with love in your heart; to be inclined toward Allah, to be attracted toward remembering Him, and to have no objective other than to gain His good pleasure. To better understand this type of worship, we use the metaphor of the person in love. The one who is in love has nothing in their mind other than their Beloved. They are constantly remembering that person, and doing everything to make him/her happy, which in turn makes them happy. In this case of the worshiper of the Real Beloved, remembrance is not a burden or a duty, but a joy to be looked forward to. Recognizing Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'ala*) is present, one is grateful for having that recognition—always moving toward Allah, always moving toward the Beloved, just like Majnun and Leila. Even though Leila is just out of reach, a silhouette on the horizon, Majnun is always moving toward the horizon, but it's always out of reach. Imam Ali (*rad'iyu-Llaahu 'anhu*) said,

*My Lord, I do not worship You because of fear of hell or desire for Paradise. I worship You because I have found You fit for being worshiped. You, Yourself, have guided me to You and called me to You. Had You not, I would not have known what You are.*

In the beginning of this journey, the spiritual traveler goes forward with the help of love. But after going through a few stages, he or she realizes that love is different from the Beloved, and tries to give up love, which was only a means of progress toward the Beloved. Now, the person concentrates all their attention on the Beloved, whom he or she worships, not for the enjoyment of love, but just for the Beloved. This subtle refinement in worship is also mirrored in our worldly relationships. In the beginning, when you meet someone you may at first ask, "How does she see me?" or "How do I know she loves me? Is she doing this for me?" Or the woman may say: "He's saying these words to me. He's giving these presents to me. He looks at me differently than he looks at someone else." That is the first stage of love. In the second stage, it doesn't matter. You see so much beauty in the Beloved that you give up any concern for yourself. It doesn't matter if you are loved in return, or how much you are loved; all that matters is the Beloved.

Then, at the next step beyond that, you begin to realize that even in that state your love is not free from duality, because you still consider yourself to be the lover. You are still seeing yourself in the equation, and this is inconsistent with *tawheed*, absolute unity. In this stage the traveler tries to forget about love, lover and beloved, and steps into the world of unity, into the Ocean of Love. At this stage, a person is said to cease to have any will or intention from their distinct personality, and instead is completely absorbed in and submitted to Allah. This is called *fanaa*, passing away. For most, this state can be achieved only momentarily. It is a state that can't be described, but it can be experienced. Prior to achieving that stage, the spiritual traveler is seeking different things: understanding, vision, insight.... But upon achieving even a moment of *fanaa*, you forget all those things. Even though you started with intention and it was necessary, you no longer have any intention because you have no desire; all becomes irrelevant. Bayazid Bistami said,

*First I renounced the world. The next day I renounced the Hereafter. The third day I renounced everything other than Allah. The fourth day I was asked what I wanted, and I said I want that I do not want.*

This brings me to the final, or penultimate, type of glorification (*‘ibadah*). That is to be an *‘abd*, meaning a slave of Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta‘ālaa*). A slave is one who expects nothing and wants nothing; he will do whatever his master wills him to do. Slaves don’t say to the master, “What’s the point? You want me to pick up that bag and take it into the house. What’s the purpose of that?” The what questions disappear. To worship as an *‘abd* means to be obedient and in submission to the Will of Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta‘ālaa*). This was the essence of the message of all the prophets. That is the best answer to the question: “What is the purpose of life?” which is not the same question as, “What can I get away with?” or “What is permitted in life?”

### WHAT IS THE FIRST STEP ON THE PATH?

As we go through our each day and are faced with the many choices and priorities, it may be hard to reconcile this goal of being a completely submitted *abd* of Allah with our daily responsibilities, needs and desires. Not only that, but it is natural for human beings to forget even the most important things, like the purpose and meaning of life. We often become so engrossed in fulfilling our material needs that we are totally mindless about our spiritual needs and Divine Commands. So, where do we begin? What is the first step on the path? We begin with the simplest and most repeated command of Allah: to remember Him.

### FA-DhKURŪNĪ ADhKURKUM WA-ShKURŪ LĪ WA LĀ TAKFURŪN.

**Remember Me, I will remember you; thank Me and reject Me not. (2:152)**

Reflection and regular prayer is ordained by Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta‘ālaa*) in order to organize our day into periods of remembrance. When we follow this pattern it interweaves our spiritual life with our material life, our inner life with our outer life. As human beings, we are creatures of habit. In many ways, we live a very ordered life. Every 4-6 hours our stomach reminds us to eat; every day our eyelids remind us to sleep; every heart-beat reminds us of the passing of time. All these regular needs to eat, work and sleep are linked with the need to renew our connection with Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta‘ālaa*), to feed our souls.

Allah says in Surah Ta Ha:

## WHAT

**INNANĪ ANĀ-LLĀHU LĀ ILĀHA ILLĀ ANĀ FA-°BUDNĪ WA AQIMI-S-SALĀTA LIDhIKRĪ.**

**Verily I am Allah. There is no God beside me, so worship me and establish regular prayer for my remembrance. (20:14)**

How do we remind ourselves to remember Allah? What is it we do? We fast. We pray. We make *dhikr*. We go on Hajj. We read Qur'an. We keep the company of people who remember Allah and remind us of Allah. We make each reminder in the physical world a reminder in the inner world. Make the grumbling of the stomach a reminder of what Allah has provided. Make the drooping of the eyelids a reminder pray before we sleep. Make each breath a reminder to be grateful. In this way we remember Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*).

Can you remember Allah too much? Of course not. Allah says:

**YĀ AYYUHĀ-LLADhĪNA ĀMANŪ UDhKURŪ ALLĀHA DhIKRAN̄ KATHĪRĀ. WA SABBIHŪHU BUKRATAN̄W-WA ASĪLĀ.**

**O believers! Remember Allah often and glorify Him morning and evening. (33:41-2)**

What is the result of regular remembrance? Through consistency in remembrance we can avert certain things. When one is in a pattern of regular remembrance, certain sins, wrong acts will not take place in your life. A sin takes place when you forget Allah. Nobody who is in a state of Divine exaltation and total peace, making *dhikr*, can be simultaneously committing a sin. They don't occupy the same space. Those forces of darkness or Shaytan or evil operate in and on us when consciousness of Allah is absent. What are those dark or satanic forces trying to occupy our minds with? With anything that will distract us, with irrelevant thoughts and desires, anything to make us forget Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*). Once Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) is forgotten; once we forget mercy and compassion and justice, and the power of the Creator, and the love of the Creator; once we forget patience and perseverance, tolerance and assistance, we become part of the corruption. As Allah says in Surah al-Mujadilah:

**ISTAḤWADhA °ALAYHIMU-SH-SHAYTĀNU FA-AÑSĀHUM DhIKRA-LLĀHI ULĀA'IKA HIZBU-SH-SHAYTĀNI-LĀ INNA HIZBA-SH-SHAYTĀNI HUMU-L-KHĀSIRŪN.**

**Shaytan got the better of them and caused them to forget Allah. Those are the party of Shaytan. Surely, the party of Shaytan are the real losers. (58:19)**

## WHAT

**WHAT IS SUFISM/THE PATH?**

In my talk so far, I have established the foundation in speaking about the purpose of life, worship and faith. These are foundations that apply to every human being. But I have also been speaking about a path, a way of life, a kind of consciousness that is called Sufism. And this brings me to the last series of “what” questions I want to answer today: What is Sufism? And what is the role of the Shaykh? These are questions that could be talks themselves (or even books), but I will address them briefly today.

Historically, Islam was spread to many places by the Sufis; it was spread by love and generosity and by principles. There are a number of stories about how Islam spread vis a vis the Sufis. There was a story about an Arab horse breeder in China, who raised and sold really superior horses. He sold them at a price much lower than the local breeders. When the emperor was told this by the local breeders who complained to him, he investigated. The Muslim defended himself by showing the ruler that his actions were of benefit to the entire community. He showed that he was adding to the wealth of the society by allowing more people to buy a better breed of animal at a price they would not have been able to afford previously. Due to that, he lived a very simple lifestyle. He was able to sell them for a lower profit and was quite content with his share. He wasn't being greedy. It was said that the ruler understood this and became a Muslim. He embraced Islam. This is a typical kind of story.

Another story is of the boat builders. On their way to China, the Sufis from North Africa (who were Shadhiliyya) stopped to repair their boats in Sri Lanka / Ceylon. The Buddhist king found them to be very honest and reliable individuals. The quality of their work, and their adab, and the way they handled themselves made him invite them to stay on in Sri Lanka. Through this group of Sufis, Islam began to spread through Sri Lanka. Even today, most Muslims in Sri Lanka are still called Moors. The original group of them built a city in the southern region, which was known as Gali, which means castle. The city now is known as Gall. Why did these people stand out to the leaders and people around them? They had a light that drew people toward them. The ignorant people of course say that the Sufis are esoteric mystics and remove themselves from society, but the history of Sufism doesn't bear that out. The Sufi is a person who tries not to waste a single moment, following the example of the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) as described in the Qur'an:

**YĀ AYYUHĀ-N-NABIYYU INNĀ ARSALNĀKA SHĀHIDANĀW-WA MUBASHSHIRANĀW-WA NADĤĪRĀ, WA DĀTYAN ILĀ-LLĀHI B'IDĤNIHI WA SIRĀJAM-MUNĪRĀ**

**O Prophet, We have sent you as a witness, and as a bearer of good news, and as a warner, and as one inviting to Allah by His permission, and as a light- giving torch. (33:45-46)**

There are many stories of our *shuyukh* who traveled the world bringing the light and knowledge of the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*): Shaykh Abul Abbas al-Mursi, who was originally from Murcia in Spain, settled in North Africa and eventually in Alexandria in Egypt; and Shaykh Ibn al-Araby, Shaykh al-Akbar, who was also from Murcia, also traveled to North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, before leaving this world in Damascus; Shaykh Moinuddin Chishti, who was Persian, came to India; Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani eventually settled in Baghdad, but was originally from Gilan in Persia. The Naqshbandi

## WHAT

Shaykhs carried the practices of the Order from Central Asia throughout the Sub-continent, West to the Middle East and East to China. In those days, the masters traveled around the world and settled and established their *kehanaqahs*, often in the centre of the cities and also in the barren wastelands for followers to seek out. These saints, sometime hidden within their shops in the bazaar, or in full view in the learning centers like the Qaraween in Fes, were lights that attracted the sincere seeker, like the moth to the flame. Well, some of us are still traveling around the world, engaging in peace-making, service, and humanitarian work *fi sabili-Llah*.

Our way of Tasawwuf is to bring harmony and balance, and to attain to remembrance of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'ala*) with every breath. Others travel, teaching Muslims about true Islam; still others remain hidden, to be found amidst the crowd. All teach Remembrance. It is this way of remembrance that enables us to gain *baseerah* (inner perception), to use our *kashf* (our intuition and understanding), and find contentment in every situation. Not just the situations that make us happy, but also the ones that may cause us some difficulty along the way. The interaction of a Sufi in all circumstances is to create harmony and understanding, balance. Unity with the universe, with the physical reality we call this world, with the ecology and the environment, is the motivation of all the actions of Sufi. We see the obstacles before us – whether they are physical, mental, or emotional – are nothing compared to the goodness and mercy that Allah offers us. Where there seems to be *qabd*/constriction, there is contentment. When there seems to be *bast* / expansion, there is contentment, acceptance. The inner state of a person of Tasawwuf is what every human being wants or strives for.

The Sufi also has to be well integrated into the community, into the society. The nobility and virtues of the Sufi, their attributes, which are reflections of the *Sifaat* (Qualities) of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'ala*) will be seen by those around them. You will find that person is respected, sought after for their guidance and opinion. That person becomes the teacher of others. That person becomes the real scholar. Periodically in the history of human beings, things become really bad. When the outer circumstances in society become challenging, intolerable; when people are upset and doubting; when they are confused and suffering; and when there needs to be balance, harmony, understanding and purpose in life, that's when people turn their attention toward a search for a way out of those situations, and that's when you find a rise in Sufism.

It is in these times, like we are living in today, that *kehanaqahs*, *zaawiyahs*, *shaykhs*, *murshids* manifest and emerge. When there is so much materialism, so much consumerism, so much darkness and decadence, so much injustice, so much corruption, then the situation needs to be balanced. That balance comes from spiritual awakening and awareness, and that's when Tasawwuf begins to manifest more, rising in society to counter and balance the negativity and restore balance, harmony, and equilibrium. It is also the time when the question of what is correct belief (orthodoxy) is challenged by correct behavior (orthopraxy).

### WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT AND TEACHER ON THE PATH?

When I was a young man I found myself in a world that was full of turmoil, darkness, and injustice. I too found that I was craving something, some deeper spiritual understanding. This is what drew me to spirituality, to Sufism. As I began to study, I realized that the only nutrition I was getting was not from the books I was reading, but from the Shaykh. Whatever his diet was; that's the one I was on. Whatever his words; those were the ones I listened to. That is when I realized that there is no Sufism without the *shuyukh*. And so, this brings me to my final “what” question of the day: “What is the role of the teacher and student on the path?”

## WHAT

As I continued to study with my Shaykh, I got to the point where I was able to distinguish my own desires and distractions from the teachings. It was then I begin to listen and really hear what he had been saying to me. My Shaykh didn't give lots of *dars* like I do, but taught vis a vis only the practices, answering my own personal spiritual questions – not often through direct question and answer, but in the moment from his *kashf*. But it wasn't until I began to make some progress, virtually by the fact that I was doing the practice, that I could hear and see even a little of the truth and efficacy of the Path. It is so easy for the student to fall into the trap of assumption and *nafs*; that is, you can take the idea, the form, the nearness to the Shaykh, or the accoutrement of Sufism for granted, not paying full attention to the subtlety of the teaching. We hear something once and think we've mastered it. Most people, even sincere and devoted people, don't have or take the time to restudy, re-listen to or re-contemplate the teachings. It is for this reason that Sufi teachers traditionally will periodically try to make an impact on their *mureeds*, in order to ground the learning, the message into their inner being.

For those trying to grasp and retain these teachings, there is an ameliorating factor, and that is the inner dynamic of the *tareeqah* and specifically of the *subbat*. When one enters into the company of others who have been saturated with the fragrance of Tasawwuf, one picks up the fragrance themselves. So, from a Sufic point of view, we say that a new person gets the benefit of the foundation and the function of the people, place and time. They receive the *fiyḍ* (Divine outpouring of Light), hence the necessity to keep the company of the people of *tareeqah*, to attend the *subbat/dars/salaat*, and to be present, as we say, in the Presence.

The role of the student or the guided seeker (*mureed*) today is one of seeking out and affirming the essence of Islam based on the essential *ilqaa*, reflection of the Divine Attributes of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ʿaalaa*), through the light of the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ʿalayhi wa sallam*) reflected upon the heart of the *murshid*. As a student of my Shaykh, I had to not only outwardly trust and serve my Shaykh, but I also had to do that inwardly. I wasn't fully able to do that or even to always understand what the characteristics of that trust were, let alone where that kind of trust leads. It was only many years later that I was able to reflect upon that and realize the steps at which I submitted, and the benefit I gained from that. Where I might have feared loss of self or will, I found peace and the *madad* (assistance) and *mayfat* (accompaniment) of the Order and of the *shuyukh*. I realized later, it was being present that was most important; but present meant not just physically present but spiritual present in *muraaqaba*, in *ghanoodgi* (*drifting*)<sup>2</sup>. It is being connected to a greater and more subtle Source/Power.

I realize that we all feel uncomfortable in yielding more and more of our own self, but it is the subtle and nuanced personal culture— unconscious assumptions that have to be tested for their relevancy to the changing person. We all need to learn how to submit in order for there to be real progress and understanding. To accept and work with what Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ʿaalaa*) has given us to work with, molds our character and refines our *nafs*. What is significant, especially in our association with our teachers, the *shuyukh*, and even *Rasuulu-Llaah* (*salla-Llaahu ʿalayhi wa sallam*), are the things you take for granted – things that you miss just because you don't know how to see them. Later on, you realize how much time you wasted in your distractions or assumptions, and how much time you could have spent truly learning how to understand, learning how to learn. To learn how to seize that moment of understanding is a skill learned in the company of the *shaykh*. The *shaykh* alone is able to tell when, where, and in what way the practices or the other activities and exercises should occur in order for the student to learn.

---

<sup>2</sup> “*nuʿaas*” in Arabic, as mentioned in Quran: “[Remember] when He wrapped you in a slumber [giving] security from Him and sent down upon you from the sky, rain by which to purify you and remove from you the evil [suggestions] of Satan and to make steadfast your hearts and plant firmly thereby your feet.” [8:11]

## WHAT

What concerns the *shaykh* is whether or not you are getting the benefit of what has been given. If you can dutifully do what has been asked, or practice what has been given, he will know you are getting the benefit of it. It will be written on your face, seen in your actions, and heard in your words. The central issue is whether or not the teaching is operating, and whether people can understand through their ordinary organs of perception that there is a transforming process going on, but the experience of awakening the inner organs of perception (*lataa'if*) make that transformation a reality. What happens? The seeker/*mureed* begins to see with eyes that see and hear with ears that hear. The *mureed* becomes truly committed, with increased will power and even increased self-esteem to replace the loss of ego/ selfishness. In other words, the *mureed* becomes a better worshipper of Allah and is better able to fulfill their destiny and purpose in life.

**WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO LEARNING?**

What are the obstacles to making this kind of progress? There are many. This path is very serious. It's not a game. It's a struggle, as you know. Anyone who is serious, and who struggles, will achieve everything they desire and more than that. Whoever is lazy and negligent will have no arrival because there are too many obstacles. Constantly, there are obstacles. The greatest obstacle to making progress in this path is relying on the world, leaning toward the world, sitting with worldly people. The struggles of *dunya* may be struggling with health, or struggling with attitude, with the ego, with temperament, with desires (for money, food, power, etc.). It is because of this that Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'ala*) has promised us a reward in the *akhirat*. For those few who worship not for the sake of themselves, or for the sake of Paradise, but only for the sake of Allah, and are brought near to Allah, there is very little that will hurt them or imprison them. But the nearest ones reach this highest state by avoiding the dangers of this journey.

As I began by saying today, we strive to make this journey, *fee saabeel Allah*, for the pleasure or sake of Allah. The secret of success in this is to be in balance (*meezaan*) between the inner and outer; to realize it is in the world of the *barzakh* that we are really traveling. The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said: **“All people, except those who know, will perish. All those who know, except men of deeds, will perish. All men of deeds, except the sincere, will perish.”** Then he added, **“And all the sincere ones are in grave danger.”** If you really want to reach a higher station and eat the sweet fruit from the branches of the tree of spiritual journeying, then you have to know how to leave the *dunya* completely, forget about everything that is an obstacle, and busy yourself with Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'ala*), at least for a period of time.

**CONCLUSION: HEARING THE ANSWERS**

I began today with speaking about the human urge to question. In conclusion, I want to say something about answers. A student may think that just because they can ask the question, they are also ready for the answer, but this is not always the case. There is an analogy given by our predecessors in the Naqshbandi tradition of a person who was gifted a pomegranate. When he received this gift he had just finished a full meal, so instead of eating it right away, he kept the pomegranate until his stomach was ready and in a condition to digest it correctly. He respected the pomegranate. He knew that the pomegranate had certain characteristics and qualities to it. If eaten under the wrong conditions, not ripe or at the wrong time of day even, it could cause upset in the stomach. If there is something wrong with your stomach when you eat the pomegranate, it will make your stomach worse. Often, our inclination is to eat the pomegranate as soon as you have it in your hand. And of course, this is what happens also with students.

## WHAT

The assumption is if it's there, if I can read about it, if I can gather in a group with it, if I can hear the *shaykh* talk about it, if I watch other people do it, then it's okay for me to do it, which is not true. If you watch someone else taking their medicine and you take a handful of their pills it will not be good for you. Similarly, the *shuyukh* continually provide ways for us to gain knowledge, at the right time and place, and some of it is to be stored for a later time. When a new student first comes onto the path they may learn about the *lataa'if* or *muraaqabah* and then rush to the Internet and read about them, thinking they understand them. But you cannot get a transmission from Google. You can go in the kitchen you can find water and salt and flour and yeast, but the kitchen won't tell you how to make bread. A person can store up information like a kitchen full of supplies, but to know how to use it, when to exercise in the moment the distribution of knowledge is another skill altogether. The person who has the most of that knowledge stored up, and who understands that subtlety of distribution is our *shaykh*, the *shuyukh*. Ultimately, we must remember that it is Allah who provides. It is Allah who provides the question and the answer, the ingredients and the ability to use them.

The Prophet's (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said, **“The heart of the slave is between the two fingers of the Merciful.”** Allah is the Provider, and He alone can make you oblivious to the pain of the struggle and the distractions. He alone can increase our desire to walk on the path. Only Allah can help us turn away from the things other than Him.

## CLOSING DUAA

*Allaahumma, yaa mufattiha-l-abwaab, wa yaa musabbiba-l-asbaab, wa yaa muqaliba-l-quluubi wa-l-absaar, wa yaa daleela-l-mutahhareen, wa yaa ghiyaatha-l-mustaghayatheen, ananaa tawakalnaa 'alayka, yaa Rabbu-l-aalameen, wa nufawad amwarinaa ilaa-Llaah, inna-Llaaha baseerun bi-l-ibaad, bi'alfi “Laa hawla wa laa quwata illaa bi-Llaahi-l-Aliyi-l-Adheem”.*

O Allah! O Opener of doors, O Causer of reasons, O Changer of hearts and insights. O Guide of the perplexed, O Aid of those who call out for help. We rely on You, O Lord of the worlds. And we entrust our affairs to Allah. Surely, Allah is the seer of His slaves, by means of a thousand, “There is no power and no strength but in Allah, the Elevated and Tremendous.”