



[The Journey through Ritual Prayer](#)
to Inner Spiritual Meanings of Life

Allah Swt revealed in His Holy Text:

Shall I seek other for my Lord when he is the Lord of everything? And whatever wrong a soul commits rests upon itself alone. And no bearer of burdens shall remain to bear the burden of another. Then unto your Lord is your return, and He shall inform you about that upon which you have differed. (6:164)

This is from Surah ash-Shams.

By the sun in its brightness and by the moon following it and reflecting, and the day when it reveals, and the night when it veils it, and the sky and that which built it, and the earth and that which spread it, and the soul and that which shaped it and inspired it both to lasciviousness and to consciousness of Allah, successful is the one who purifies it, and failed is one who buries it in sins. (91:1-2)

It's a beautiful sunny spring day, and families have returned, *Alhamdulillah*. We are very blessed. Allah also says in the Qur'an:

O servants of Allah! Allah certainly commands you to be just and kind in the affairs of men, and render assistance to your kinsmen. And Allah has forbidden you sins and shameful acts, and has given you clear warning that

you take heed and tread the right path. And remembrance of Allah is the greatest of all actions, and He is the Superior, the Glorious, the Honored.

What has Allah revealed in the Qur'an? Nothing other than the truth. We spoke last night about that in terms of *wahadat ash-shuhūd*. In short and clear words of these *surahs*, there is a lot to think about. For example, in Surah al-Fajr there is an example of the journey, which we have been speaking about. Allah says, **“O soul at peace! Return to your Lord content and in good pleasure. Enter among the bondsmen, enter My Garden.** Then He references the soul again in Surah Shems, **“...and He who perfected it.”**

These brief statements have a lot of meaning. We know that religion in general and the *dīn* of Islam specifically is to give meaning and order to human life, and establish an outward harmony with all life. The basis or foundation of it can reach to the knowledge and experience of Allah Swt inwardly. We have an opportunity to do that and return again and again throughout our life to that awareness and experience of Allah, as He is reflected in creation and in our life itself. So the journey toward an interior direction is something I've been talking about recently, about forming your life around your spiritual practices and your spiritual life, letting your outer life be formed automatically from that and have its meaning from that.

The *sayr-l-suluk* implies a journey in time. It's very important to us the universal function, especially in Islam. It is not just because Islam is the last revealed religion for humanity. It is revealed truth, which is the Divine injunction to establish order in human society. It is a way to return to our own soul of our origins, or to an awareness of the nearness of our Creator. At the same time, it is a way to make possible not only order in our outer life, and balance in our inner and outer life, but to do it in an orderly and noble manner in preparation for our final return. The whole journey of return [is] symbolically [reflected] in human life, spiritually, meditatively awakening to one's own potential self

through humbly trusting and giving our love and trust over to Allah Swt. The trust in the blessings and healing and the love of Allah is also symbolic of the return to eternity, or that place in eternity called Paradise.

All of this is by the grace of Allah, the love of Allah, the beatitudes of Allah Swt. It begins with Allah and it ends with Allah, so we say Allah is the First and the Last; but in between, it is up to us. We know from His Names that He is the *dhahir* and the *batin*, the outer and the inner. It is the interplay of outward and inward through which He creates both the concept of separation and otherness, difference and diversity; as well as unity, interrelationships, and inter-dependency through which He in most instances can apply His compassion and mercy. Through the inwardness, He brings us back to our origin; and through the outwardness, He teaches us His Presence everywhere. Unless we take seriously this journey, we are going to be as if we are shooting dice, or as if we are playing a hand of poker and we can't bluff. If you want to bluff in poker, you don't do it the first hour you play the game. You don't want to have people think you are bluffing all the time or they will beat you for sure. You have to bluff only 5% of the time. Most people go through life bluffing about everything, which is why life is the way it is, unfortunately.

Religion in general, Islam specifically, and the means by which this *suluk* is made possible reflect a structure in creation that issues from Allah and returns to Allah, and how we live as a model in this creation. There is dimension in our spiritual life and in the life of a Sufi, a dimension that is outward and a dimension that is inward. Most of us react and respond outwardly from the time we are children to the time we are old adults. The dimensions in the course of life are encompassed by boundaries and guidelines like we find in the Shar'iah, like the methods and practices we find in *tariqah*, knowledge that comes to us from the two we call Haqqiq.

It is a special kind of knowledge we call gnostic knowledge, or, as we tend to talk about it, as *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan*—surrender, trust, having faith, and recognizing that Divine Presence and trying to through its beauty and majesty, even though we may not see it fully, we know that Allah is seeing us. There is a kind of security that comes that trumps arrogance, a kind of humbleness that comes that affirms the generosity of Allah Swt. But from the Sufic point of view, that of *ihsan* (to act as if we see Allah in everything) is an act of virtue in our outer life, but also in our inner life. It enables us to live, to serve, and to pass out of this world as an individual who is destined to do something greater. Allah calls this the “great reward.” The rites and rituals themselves are not limited to their outer forms—for example, the *jumah* prayer. We are enjoined to speak of Islam in ways we should practice it and live it, and the gathering of all of us together to seek an inner understanding adds more dimension to *jumah*, to Friday prayer.

It’s very important that we affirm that there is a greater dimension, a meaning that we can really reach to, that we can function at. It is not just based on our faith, but on our experience. If you don’t practice, if you don’t study, if you don’t join in the *suhbat* openly, if you don’t consider yourself even a small part of the *ummah*, then how are you going to make progress, since that is like saying you need flour, water, and yeast, and heat to make bread. How do you make progress? There is a point where people stop thinking about progress. They become so totally absorbed in their outer life, the positives and negatives, how many debts they have, how much money they have, how much property they have, or how many children they have, or what they don’t have. Human beings find they have to deny the concept of progress itself, lest they become so totally miserable because of their inability to structure their outer life around their inner life.

The pillars of Islam, the practices of Islam become a living reality in life when you begin to see how they fit, what they mean, and what they point to. The ability to read / recite the Qur’an does not give you the ability to understand it. You have to make extra effort. You have to ask questions. You have to engage in it, and see how it reflects day to day life.

Our prayers, *salat, namaz* are fundamental rites, but they also contain profound symbolic significance. How do you get to that significance if you don't practice properly, sincerely, and regularly? The performance of these acts is dynamic. They come from the Sunnah of *Rasūlu-Llāh* (sal). They are his experience. They are considered to be the most important aspect of religious acts, most of which are not in the Qur'an. The Prophet (sal) said,

The first of man's deeds for which he will be taken to account on the Day of Resurrection is his prayer. And if it is sound, he will be saved and successful. If it is unsound, he will be unfortunate and miserable.

That's not just a simple statement about, if you do this and are good, you will go to Paradise. If you don't and are bad, you are going to go to hell. That's not really what is meant in my opinion. "If it is sound" means that if the meaning comes from the right place with the right intention, if you understand the relevancy of prayer to your life, then that leads you to other states of awareness and understanding and experience that make you safe and secure and successful. Life becomes successful. If you pray without meaning, or if you don't pray, you have no experience. You don't see the Divine Presence. You are not inspired. You are not secure. You are not feeling safe. You are not comfortable in yourself and in life. You are totally disillusioned and distracted by things of this world, your fears. Then of course, your life will be unsafe and fearful. There will be no progress. Then he goes on.

If any deficiency is found in his obligatory prayer, the Lord, Who is Blessed and Exalted, will issue instructions to find whether the servant has any voluntary prayers, so that what is lacking in the obligatory prayer will be made up by that. And then the rest of his actions will be treated in the same fashion.

How merciful. Why would you choose to do nafile or superogatory prayers? You can choose out of fear; or the fact you choose to do it is a testimony to your character, patience, love, trust, understanding, the time you are taking, how you are dividing your time. That's what it testifies to. It's not the number, nor the fact you are going to do it in order to escape some kind of punishment. *Alhamdulillah*, this is good news. On one hand, you do the *sunnah* or *nafile*, but the true meaning is that Allah always opens a door for us. There is always a way. Some may say a way out; I like to say a way in. The *salat* we do every day is a very profound aspect of the interiorization of our external life. You know you have an external life, because you become totally absorbed in it. But how many people are taking note of their interior life? Some people say about their problems, "I'm totally distraught. I'm a mess inside." Well, that's good. You got a view of the inside mess. "I've got to stop doing this; it's driving me crazy." We understand the relationship between what happens in the outer and what happens in the inner. "If I stay in that situation, it's going to make me sick." We understand there is a relationship between the outer and the inner. We use it in our idiom every day. "That person is driving me crazy"—the outer and the inner.

Yet there is even more subtle information that is coming to us every day. When we get angry or upset, we are reticent; we talk back. Very few of us don't recognize it. We see it, but we dismiss it. Don't dismiss it; it's a symptom. Every religion has rites and rituals to be done sincerely and properly.

I live only to do Thy will. My lips move only in praise of Thee, O Lord. Whoever becomes aware of Thee casts out all other than Thee, O Lord. Give me a heart and let me pour it out in thanksgiving. Give me a life that I may spend it in working for the salvation of this world. O Lord, give me understanding that I may not stray from the path. Give me light that I may avoid pitfalls. Give me eyes that see nothing but Your Glory. Give me a mind that finds the light of Your Presence and service. Give me a soul drunk in the wine of Your Wisdom.

Who would think of that? Under what circumstances do you think of that? Why would you make that up, or say that? Just to say that means something happened in the outer. Something transpired, and now this *du'ā* comes to your lips. Why? Because there is a *bab* / doorway that has opened. You saw something, felt something; you opened the door, and that's what came through. So, everything's okay, because that's your proof that your default is with Allah. But if you are angry and miserable, ornery and grumpy, not obedient... now that I talked about the children... if that door isn't opened, it's because you have not done your prayers on time. You have not turned to Allah. You have not understood what you read in the Qur'an. You have not absorbed and embraced the life Allah Swt has given you. You don't have appreciation for the womb from which you came. You don't have appreciation for the people you are serving. I'm talking to adults now. It's that simple; it's not complicated—and we all are at fault.

The outward aspects of life are necessary points of departure in this journey to the inward. The experience of the Divine is imminent from the beauty of nature and the beauty of our own life, and understanding is dependent on that and our awareness of the Divine. When that door opens, the light that comes through is the light of Allah Swt. Our ego tells us, “Don't change; don't apologize, don't do this or that, because it's not going to be accepted. I'll be taken advantage of. If I say 'yes' to this, I'll be asked to do 25 other things.” And we totally misunderstand. This is not about the outer world. If you keep order in your outer life, you will have a much better chance of having order inwardly and on the inner journey.

Our awareness of the Divine is transcendent. No one has the right to approach Allah, who is with us, without surrendering ourselves to that which transcends what we are not able to comprehend. Islam is a necessity for perception and nearness to Allah. From another point of view, we could say that only by accepting the Shar'īah is a human being able to travel on this path of *tariqah*. Only by accepting this path of *tariqah* can one

finally come to reach *haqqiq* or truth, which literally lies at the heart of everything, everything beyond everything. To turn inward and interiorize our lives is to become aware of dimension of Allah that Allah has provided for us.

On my travel to Morocco, I bought a wallet. I love it, it has pockets in it and everything. But it's made of thick leather, and doesn't fit in my inside pocket very well. The other one I have is like glove leather, but it doesn't hold my cards very well. I know, the solution is to get rid of the cards, right? The other day, I opened up the other wallet and found some money. A gift from Allah! Now Mitra is going to ask me, "Can we use the money for this and that?" We already have it delegated. What does it mean? When you open these doorways, you find treasures you forgot about. At one point, I knew that money was there because I put it there. Then on the trip, everything got mixed together as usual, but then I found it again.

We are able to travel on this path of *tariqah* because of the Shariah. We are able to come to *haqqiq* because of the *tariqah* and the *marifah*. We have recourse to certain prayers, rites, and rituals; but at the center of that is a sacred light. If you open that door, the light comes and it doesn't matter to you whether anyone sees it or not. You, yourself, appreciate that you have control over your life, that you have the ability to change, that you have a vision that you share. Allah Swt is offering us a light, and we should turn on the light. When we reflect on the teachings of the *shuyukh*, we see that they are always pointing us toward the Shar'iah. They are always pointing us toward *dhikr*, toward a life that is not limited by this physical world; and the one that is accompanying us is accompanying us with love, *mayati hubbi*.

Whether we speak about Islam, *irfan*, or Tasawwuf, we are speaking about what is happening in the heart of the believer. We are speaking about potentiality. We are turning toward the heart, and talking about what is being created in the heart of the believer. We are talking about the cream on the top of the butter. The heart is churning,

churning. Khwaja Abdullah Ansari, the saint of Heart, in his supplications gives an example of yearning from the heart, the infinite and the Divine in a very common devotional prayer that is recited in a perfect way before the one who created it. I recited it earlier. That's the story.

Prayer is one thing; *sunnah* is one thing; *nafle* is another thing. If you understand the relationship between these things and your own happiness and your own fulfillment, you would run to it, not away from it. You would check your watch and see if it is near the time. We know we all feel better when we pray on time; everyone does. It's just the truth. Some people say "Whew! Got that over with." But that's not the whole story. *Asalaam aleikum.*