



[Latīfa Nafs: Developing the Nafs Ammāra to Free the Rūh](#)
Breath and Healing

The Holy Qur'an says:

And remember when your Lord said to the angels, Surely I am creating a person out of dry clay, transmuted from dark, slimy mud. So when I have fashioned him and I have breathed into him from My spirit, then fall down before him in prostration.

Again, in Surah al-Isra, Allah sends to us the message:

And they ask you about the spirit / ruh. Say, the spirit of revelation comes by the order of my Lord, and you have been given but little real knowledge concerning it.

On the question of *qalb*, there are so many quotations, but here is this one:

No affliction befalls except it be by the permission of Allah, and who faithfully believes in Allah and guides his heart. And Allah knows all things.

We have been talking about the *latā'if*. I want to also continue in the *khutbah* in a slightly different way. We are enjoined to be very careful about how we understand our *rūh* to whatever degree we can in our *qalb*, but we have to be very careful as Muslims to understand our *nafs*. Allah tells us we have to control our self. It doesn't mean we shouldn't have desires and wants, but they shouldn't be out of proportion, and they shouldn't control us. How can desires and wants control us? What is a desire and a want? Are they things? What does it mean when we say, "My *nafs* is making me do this?" Sometimes even *nafs* is translated as "soul" by some writers.

It seems that this *nafs*, identification with the self, comes not exclusively after, but very specifically, in the encounter in the Garden of Paradise with Adam (as) and Hawa (ra). But we understand also that this idea of self, which separates us from the angels, is coming directly from Allah, too, like *rūh* in a way. How can something Allah has created be bad? It's not reasonable. Sometimes we use this term in a pejorative sense. "My *nafs* is making me do this." We have to understand that we are in a process, and *nafs* itself is in a process. It comes from the word *nafas* as we know, meaning breath. It tells us that when this soul, which is the creation of Allah Swt, comes into contact with this physical body, which is made of material things (earth, air, fire, and water), a process takes place, something dynamic happens. We call it life. Last night we talked in detail about the soul also.

That process is what we call breath. It results from the interaction between the physical body and the soul. It gives life to the physical body. The power that motivates this physical body through the breath seems to be a necessity. We have the soul, and we have this body; but something has to activate it. So Allah says He breathes into this body. This soul is the power of Allah. When the power of Allah motivates the physical body, we call that "myself," *nafs*. The self has many levels as you know. Some say seven. Some describe it as the mineral self, the vegetable self, the animal self, the human self, and the angelic self. When the soul enters into the body with the breath, it becomes imprisoned in the physical body, and it activates the organs of the body in order to express itself—sort of like, we are puppets. Something is motivating us, but not just to operate.

The organs are operant before the breath, obviously. They are operating in the womb before there is physical breath. They are operating by the breath of the soul. Allah says, "**I breath into it spirit.**" There are two aspects of this breath. One we call the spirit of the *rūh*, that allows this body to operate. It interacts with the body and makes it act in certain ways when we are born. The soul expresses itself and makes the organs act,

sealed within the body. It seeks to return, however, to its origins, and seeks out the means to do that through the body. Now the body becomes an instrument for the *rūh* / soul, using the self, to find a way back to the origins. When the brain, in conjunction with the heart, is motivated towards actions that are beneficial and good, it creates or discovers the means through which the soul can come back into contact with its origins – through consciousness, we say, through intention, through activities and practices, through movements of the body, through breathing consciously, through yogis doing yoga, sitting for long periods of time, hanging upside down from a tree limb over an abyss, which the early Sufis did, to stay conscious.

Even while it is contained within this body, or even when it ventures out partially so to speak during sleep or meditation, how can it leave the body while it still lives? How can I move from this body, to some degree, while I am still alive in this physical body, and come back into contact with my origins? We call it “die before you die.” Some people call that enlightenment. Some Indians call it *samadhi*. We say it is a state of *insānu-l-kāmil* – *fana*, and *baqa*. When the heart is motivated towards greed, or the urges of the heart are going in an improper direction, and the lower, undeveloped aspects of the self are empowered in ways that are not constructive, it begins expressing desires and wants in a self-destructive way. Has anybody in this room every done anything self-destructive?

When the heart is motivated toward love, kindness, sharing, and compassion, it is motivated in a higher way. When the passions of the organs of the body are motivated in a way that is animalistic, demanding, and overwhelming, then the animal nature of the *nafs* is brought forward. What is the animal nature? We can go back to the concept of ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The different stages we go through in the development of the embryo makes some impression on us. It is said that on the Day of Judgment, the body will be asked to account for its sins, and the body will blame the soul, and say, “I had no power to act. All the power for my bad actions came from the soul.”

The soul will say, “But I had no means to act, no venue, but for the body. Without the physical body, I could not have committed any sins. So the blame goes to the body.” You remember the story of the strong blind man who was carrying the cripple on his back. The cripple told him where to go. Together, they arrived at their destination.

When our organs are put into misuse, bad qualities come out. Allah doesn't create the bad qualities, but He has given us the ability to use the power of the soul, which has now become the self, to develop Divine Qualities. If we use it improperly, we develop undesirable qualities. But the model for those good qualities is always near to us. He sees to it that we always can see the models of His Divine Qualities through His Attributes. *Alhamdulillah*, in every generation, there are good people and good models. In every person, there is an inclination to the good. So we recognize it when we see it, hear it, or feel it. Just like when we hear, see, and feel something that is good, but we are doing something that is not good, we feel ashamed. The power then is within us. The means are within the organs of our body, the brain and the heart, and the other physical organs.

For example, when our stomach thinks for us – at times, some of us have that problem – we develop dependence and desires that lead to ill health and obesity, and guilt. When our brain becomes the servant of the stomach, we know what that is like. When our mind, our consciousness, our heart becomes the servant of the heart and the *rūh*, only good can happen. The means to return to our origin is through those doors. When our negativity, fears, anxieties, and doubts take the energy from our beingness, our *rūh*, and place it as the force of the *nafs ammāra* in the different organs and aspects of our body or physical life, these different problems come about. If it's in our kidneys, we have tension, anxiety, anger, sharpness. Our pains are like that, too. In the liver, it becomes bile and fire. In the gall bladder: anger, desire, dullness, and torpor, sloth. In the lungs, water gathers, heaviness and slowness, asthma, allergies, and allergic reactions. It comes from reactivity, which causes reactions to the natural disbalance. Harassment as a child and being put down creates conditions like insecurity, sometimes depression; or pushed too

hard: anger; contained too much: tumors and abscesses. All this is why the great masters and teachers always come back to breath – *nafas* and *nafs*.

We see that this is the power of the soul in the physical body. Indeed, if we remember how and learn how to breathe properly, we will be not only physically more balanced, but spiritually more balanced. That's why with every Sufic practice, with every *dhikr*, there is breath. It's not just limited to Muslims, we know. We find it among Hindus and Buddhists and even among Christian mystics. Breath is very important. I wonder how many of us have been thinking about our breath recently. We have forgotten it. The power and energy of the breath (*nafas*, *chi*, or *prana*) is contained in this body, but it has to be free. So Allah says He breathed into the clay and gave it life. If we breathe into our own life, we give ourselves freedom and open the doorways to our origins. We soften the heart. By softening the heart and allowing the heart, through love, [we become] able to control this simple quality of love Allah created us with.

It is said in a *daif hadith* that Allah loved to be known so He created humanity. It is true that through love we can communicate with each other through cultural barriers, gender barriers, and age barriers. Even across the barrier of life and death we can love, as we love the *shuyukh* who have passed and the loved ones who have passed. We can learn how to direct that power of love. How? Through our words: words cannot exist without breath. Through our thoughts: our brain cannot operate without that breath. The actions that we show in our love to one another, allow ourselves to develop through those states of *nafs*. This physical body that we have been talking about recently is a means through which love is expressed in the physical world. But it also becomes an example of a means through our inner development that we can seek out our origins.

There is a standard, too. The standard is determined by how well we strive to live by the Qualities and Attributes of Allah. Just like the *nafs* interacts with the physical body, and the physical bodies interact with each other as they manifest the *nafs*, the *nafs* goes from

being an animal soul which is inviting disease, to the reproaching self, to the calm and serene self, one that's inspired, one that is fulfilled, one that is fulfilling, and one that is liberated. This *nafs* is not inherently bad. Just like with breath you can say terrible things or you can say beautiful things. It's wrong to blame the *nafs* for our problems. The role of the Sufi, and truly the role of Islam I believe, is to transform the self back to one that is conscious of its original state. To change, to create an atmosphere for that to develop, we create environments like our own.

When we are dominated by only our desires, and we can't control them, and they manifest in disease, torpor, illness, dullness or anger, all of which is undirected, it doesn't mean there are not times one should not be angry, or one should not eat for fear of obesity. It's not wrong that we get some disease or illness, because we can strengthen ourselves by fighting it. We can also humble ourselves by having it. When it's undirected, and we are dominated by the lower nature of our self, or our wants and desires, that animal self takes over. Just as the *rūh* is contained or captured by the body and seeking its way out, so too this *nafs* is captured in the body; and either it is going to use the body as a vehicle for its own upliftment and development, or it is only going to manifest its lower nature. When we begin to realize that and struggle within ourselves, then these quotations I gave you from Qur'an begin to have meaning to us.

Acting with reason, rationality, and knowledge; developed by prayer, meditation and dhikr, recitation of Qur'an, all these actions are infused with the Names and Attributes of Allah. Why do we pray? Why do we make *du'ā*? Why do we make these supplications? Why do we ask Allah? How are we doing it? We always doing it with the quality of the heart and the finest, directed breath. Whether it is saying Qur'an correctly, or speaking gently, sweetly and with good intention, it has a healing power to it. For those of us who, like myself, are a little ill right now, or have something a little more chronic, I advise that we remember breath. I advise that we remember how many days have we poisoned our body with bad words and bad thoughts, with negativity and criticism. It's like ingesting

poison. Some people are allergic—allergic to pollen or formaldehyde in the carpets—allergic to many things. Our immune system is reacting to it.

Really, truly; we have lost our way. We forgot about breath. We forgot about self-discipline. We forgot about practicing things in relationship to nature. We forgot about respecting our own bodies, all of us have forgotten some of those. It's not that we are not reminded of it wherever we look; it's that we choose not to see it. This path that we are on is supposed to change us: changer of hearts. When we begin to realize that we struggle with the self/*nafs*, we need to remember that there is a part of us always in contact with Allah Swt. If we come into contact with that part of us, in metaphoric or even literal terms, if we breathe in our *rūh*, in our *latā'if*, you might find there is a healing there. When we recite the Qur'an, when we think about Allah; when we bring those divine qualities near to us, and when we remember in those specific moments what we need we recite: Ya Hayyu al Qayyum, the Ever-Living, ar-Rahman ar-Rahīm, Ya Allahu, Ya Rahmanu, Ya Rahīmu, Ya Hayyu Ya Qayyum wa dhal Jelali wal Ikram.

Those are the names from our Order that we should be reciting and breathing, not just repeating them; but breathing them, striking the heart with them, striking the *rūh* with them, striking each *latīfa* with them, softening the heart so it receives the impression of those Attributes and Names. Those Names are like remedies, and striking them are like Homeopathic remedies. They should heal us, or assist in our healing. You have to remember to remember. When Majnun was in love with Leila, his mind was impressed with the image of Leila. Everywhere he looked, he saw Leila. When Zuleikha was in love with Yusuf, she would give her jewelry away to people who would tell her what he was doing at that moment, anything to find out about him.

The women would criticize and gossip about her, so she called them together one day and gave them fruit and sharp knives. Then she called Sidna Yusuf (as) into the room. They were so taken by his beauty they started cutting themselves and not the fruit. She said,

“There. Do you see why I am the way I am?” When he became the favorite of Pharaoh and was liberated, he still couldn’t marry her because she was the wife of his master. She had been cast out by her husband because of her love for Yusuf, and the embarrassment it caused. She was living in rags in the street, and lost her beauty through her life’s difficulties. He rode by one day with a retinue of men and saw her, and said, “Before I could not marry you, but now we are both free. I will marry you now.” And she said, “Before I needed to marry you, because you were everything to me. But the veil has been rent from my eyes, and now my love is for Allah alone. I don’t need to marry you.” What life brings!

The passion and love for Sidna Yusuf softened her heart. Remembering—the recitation of Allah’s Name liberated her. Through prayer, meditation, *dhikr*, reading Qur’an, and being near to Allah, not being ashamed to turn to Allah; not being ashamed to take the resources within our own selves and our own bodies, we transform ourselves with those resources. We have forgotten; and become lazy, and older. Now we have to muster the energy that came easily to us before. Getting up at 6:00 in the morning, doing an hour’s worth of service, doing *surya namaskar* when we were yogis in the very beginning, doing our breathing, getting up for *fajr*, sitting together in *muraqabah*. Breathing, breathing, breathing, sitting and reciting, calling out to Allah—we were a group of healthy people for a long period of time. Very little illness attacked us, and nothing was chronic. Is it too late?

We have young children here. What do they know from this? Nothing. Nothing! They know about computers. They know they are supposed to go to school. They know they do community service. They know the Shaykh talks and talks and talks. They know we do *dhikr*. What do they know from the core of it—the power that resides in their own bodies, their own hearts, and their own minds? It’s like assimilation, assimilation into the deluded, forgetful world that people know nothing in, and live their lives as if they were just supposed to be lived, and they have no purpose to it. You don’t communicate with

your soul. You don't communicate with your heart, and you do things because you are supposed to. That's what many of us fought against 40 years ago, and created this place. The *nafs ammāra* takes on all these funny little faces and thinks, everything looks good. We have nice new cars, new houses, this and that. But what do we have?

In every language and culture you have this phrase: if you don't have your health, you don't have anything. It's in Farsi, Arabic, Hebrew, French, whatever language you can find. If you don't have your health, you don't have anything, as if it is some kind of a craps game, and we are living in Vegas. You know the odds are stacked against you in Vegas, so time to turn back, to become satisfied with what Allah gives us. Yes, we should be satisfied if Allah gives us pain or illness, conflict, peace, joy—and accept what Allah gives us. But what is our part in it? If you are in prison, it means you are not free. You are kept from your home. The soul placed in this body finds its way back to its origin, one way or another.

Shaytan was an angel, the chief of the *jinn* cast out of Paradise, but not permitted to enter into the body and go through this transition stage. Hazrat Adam (as) was the first soul to be embodied, so it could go through process of growing. Shaytan wouldn't bow to this process, in other words, seeking to take over those bodies, or influence them in such a way that they couldn't transcend that state, so they couldn't develop.

The highest level of the development of the *nafs* is not part of this world, but an aspect of the Divine Attribute of the Ever-Living. When the *nafs* rises through prayer, meditation, breathing, and manifestation of Divine Attributes, through daily practice and intention, with our *adab* right and motivated by the highest ideals in this world for the next, with *muraqabah*, *tawbah*, *tafakkur*, and engagement with Allah Swt with one another, you come into contact with an aspect of Allah Swt called “al-Hayy” the Ever-Living, You have then transcended. You are no longer contained by this world. Even though you are still in this body, you have found a doorway out while still in this world. It's what all the

yogis look for, what the mystics of every age look for. It's what the Sufis have. It's exactly what the prophets, which we have been talking about, have been sent here to tell us about.

Today is an admonishment, then, for all of us to remember; and that somehow our children get this message. Somehow, it has to click within their minds that there is a tremendous power within them. These practices we do are not just silly practices, or some religious formalism. It has nothing to do with that. The cover of the Qur'an is the religion; what is contained in the words on the pages is the Truth. The cover is the body; the meaning of the words is the *rūh*. If you disdain, reject, turn away from, don't put any emphasis on, or put little value on prayer or *wudu* or meditation, or reciting Qur'an, or acting in a good way, or putting others before yourself, or on gaining knowledge; if you surrender to whatever happens in the world; if you are just people on the Jersey Shore or Muslims in an American kind of assimilation mentality; if you just give up the meaningful things, what do you have? A useless life. You accomplish nothing, you help no one, and you undermine yourself.

If it's been more than a day since you've read something on a piece of paper, because you're only reading it on the computer, and it's hard to lift your head up off the computer when someone walks into the room, you are developing an addictive personality trait. By the way, there is a new addiction defined. Fifty years ago there were fifty different elements that defined psychiatric disorders, and now there are 350. Some are questionable; the article was fair to say so. What are we a slave to? If our unregenerate *nafs* is a slave to this physical body, can't break out; if our *rūh* doesn't find its way out and is imprisoned by this body, then the question is, what is this body enslaved to? It is enslaved to the computer; to desires, to money; to power. Is that the purpose of life? If you can't shake it off, don't get near it. If you can't turn away from it; stay away from it.

That's what everybody has told us for thousands of years. There are always personalities who get addicted, or who forget; we all have forgotten. We can't just say, we are getting older; therefore, we are getting more sick. I saw on television the weatherman in Florida, Willard Scott. He always lists the people over 100 for Smucker's. There were people 102, 106, 107 and a lady who was 110 years old. She attributes her long life to not worrying about anything: It's all in God's hands. [The point is not just that] they live to be that old, but they enjoyed life for those hundred + years. He doesn't say, Bob Jones, 122, with Alzheimer's and dementia and peeing in his pants. Those people don't live to be that long. The people who do like family, pasta, salsa dancing—still dances at 104! Really, our children don't understand this, and we are forgetting it.

BREATHE. Don't demean the things of the past. "Oh, yoga is weird!" The kids think that sometimes. Just like we thought things were weird. When the children take walks, they discover beautiful things in nature and bring beautiful things home and make beautiful pictures. *Alhamdulillah-Llāh*, for just having the trees here. *Alhamdulillah-Llāh*, for having the animals here. If for no other reason, a reason to live here is because of the nature. Look at our place in DC. Some apartments have trees in front of them. But the kids come out of the elevator, get on a bus, go to school, get back on a bus, come home to a concrete building, and what do they do? What a blessing we have here. But you forget. Remember where I started this. If the self doesn't develop, the soul only knows one way of freedom then: through death. May Allah forgive us all for forgetting.

BREATHE. If I could turn the clock back, I wouldn't have stopped the 6am work groups. I wouldn't have stopped the morning exercises, the energizations. Grandma and I used to go at 7:00 in the morning in San Mateo to the park where a group of people stood in a circle and did wonderful exercises. The average age was maybe 60? There was one man who rode to the park on a bicycle with a collapsible sword, and every day he taught two women. He was probably in his 70's or 80's. Healthy people, walking. I'm ashamed of myself! Chronic diseases, chronic ailments, chronic this and that—let's beat it. And

children: don't write this off. Count your blessings; don't think people are just strange. Maybe like men wearing dresses with beads...? No. Look behind it. Healthy people. Is it too late? Am I too late by 10, 15 years? That's my fear. Every one of us should have been up every morning doing exercises with our children. Then they wouldn't think it was so silly; and they would be better at karate, dancing, everything.

DU'AS. O Allah, for those who are ill, help us to remember how to become well. For those who have passed, help us to learn the lesson of their lives, and pray for their souls. For those of us who are living and healthy, keep us in that state by our consciousness, our submission, our practices, and our love for you, our love for humanity, and our respect for our own selves. *Amin.*