



FAITH – FULL: THE PROPHET IBRAHIM

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Surah al Fatiha

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

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

**YĀ MAWJŪDAN ʿINDA-Sh-ShADĀĀʾIDI YA KHAFIYYA-L-LUTFI, YĀ LATĪFA-S-SUNʿI.
YĀ HALĪMAN, LĀ YAʼJILUQDI ḤĀJATĪ 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 merciful.
Glory be to Thee, on Thy Grace, after Thy Knowledge.
Glory be to Thee, on Thy forgiveness, after Thy Power.

INTRODUCTION

Today we are speaking about the Prophet Ibrahim, but let us begin by asking the question: who was the Prophet Ibrahim? What was his character? We are told that he was a pious human being, an obedient human being. He was compassionate, generous. He was extremely committed to the reality of one Truth, Allah (*Subḥānahu wa taʿālaa*). Allah says of him in Surah al-Imran:

MĀ KĀNA IB^āRĀHĪMU YAHŪDIYYAÑW-WA LĀ NAŞRĀNIYYAÑW-WA LĀKIÑ KĀNA ḤANĪFAM-MUSLIMAÑW-WA MĀ KĀNA MINA-L-MUSHRIKĪN.

Ibrahim was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was one of pure faith (*haneef*) who was wholly surrendered [to Allah], and he was not from the polytheists. [3:67]

Still today he is an example for all people and every nation. He was not a Jew; he was not a Christian. He was *hanifam musliman*—an upright man who had submitted to Allah. Who was he? He was, and still is, the friend of Allah, in submission to Allah. He exemplified in his life the steadfast trust and dedication of a believer. With that affirmation of trust came the many hard choices a believer has to make. As a prophet, his choices and challenges were matched to the height of his sincerity and conviction to the depth of his submission and trust.

We all have hard spiritual choices to make in life. Sometimes, these choices are so hard that it can seem logical, reasonable, and easy to make the wrong choice. As we look today at the stories and choices of the Prophet Ibrahim (*alayhi-s-salām*), we will see his example in the face of what many of us would consider impossible choices. At each stage, the Prophet Ibrahim faces mortality, making choices of life and death. While it might seem to the ignorant observer that in these situations he chooses “death,” the reality is that he chooses Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta^āaalaa*)—he chooses to obey and submit to Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta^āaalaa*), not knowing the consequences, and accepting they may even be death. There is a profound subtlety of the submitted soul that can be found in his example, a theme and an attitude that I hope to explore today, both in an historical context and as it applies to us in a practical way.

SUBMISSION AND AQEEDAH

All of the major prophets who we are speaking about in this series, up to the Prophet Mohammed (*salla-Llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*), interface with life and death in similar ways. Beginning with the Prophet Adam (*alayhi-s-salām*), we can see that each prophet was tested by their mortality and the mortality of those they loved. As we understand from Surah Ta Ha, Hazrat Adam (*alayhi-s-salām*) was vulnerable to the Whisperer because of his fears of mortality.

FA-WASWASA ILAYHI-SH-SHAYṬĀNU QĀLA YĀ ĀDAMU HAL ADULLUKA ‘ALĀ SHAJARATI-L-KHULDI WA MULKIL-LĀ YAB^āLĀ.

Shaytan whispered to him, saying “Oh Adam! Shall I lead you to the Tree of Eternal Life and a Kingdom that will never decay?” [20:120]

So we see he is deceived by Iblis into thinking that if he eats from the tree, he will have immortality. When in fact, he had immortality, and then was given mortality; thus mortality enters the picture with Hazrat Adam (*alayhi-s-salām*). The Prophet Nūh (*alayhi-s-salām*) defied death (by the will of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta^āaalaa*)), living for 950 years, but in that time he was faced with the death (and loss of faith) of his son. As Qur’an tells us, this loss is the one thing he questioned Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta^āaalaa*) about.

And then we come to The Prophet Ibrahim (*'alayhi-s-salām*) who faces this same choice as it relates to his past (his father), his present (him own life), and his future (his son). We will return and explore this further, but first let us follow the theme to the Prophet Musa (*'alayhi-s-salām*) who was saved from the death decreed by Pharaoh as a baby, but must face it again in difficult ways, [like] when his guide, Khidr kills the young boy; and finally he is denied entrance into Canaan, and dies apparently without completing his sojourn. Of course, mortality is also a central theme of the legacy of the Prophet Isa (*'alayhi-s-salām*), who faces his own death with a question of being forsaken, according to the Injeel and what Qur'an says:

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WA QAWLIHIM INNĀ QATALNĀ-L-MASĪĤA ... WA MĀ QATALŪHU WA MĀ ṢALABŪHU WA LĀKIŅ SHUBBIHA LAHUM ...

They say “We killed the Messiah...” They neither killed him nor did they crucify him, but it only appeared so to them... [4:157]

Then we have the Prophet Mohammed (*salla-Llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*) who faced death again and again (in the year of sorrow, when he is hiding in the cave, in each of the battles, and in attempts on his life), but ultimately seals the line of Prophets with a natural death, having completed his mission and created a lasting legacy of hope and guidance for all people, a behest that lives today and still grows and touches hearts anew each day around this globe (*alhamdulillah*). Our Prophet's (*salla-Llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*) attitude toward death was one of complete submission, saying, **“O Allah! Keep me alive as long as life is better for me, and let me die if death is better for me.”** [Sahih Al-Bukhari – Book 70 Hadith 575]

What is important about this pattern that I bring to your attention today? It is a pattern that exemplifies that attitude of the greatest prophets; it reflects what they chose and what they valued. Certainly, the will to live is one of our most basic genetic messages, and thus our mortality and the passing of those we love is probably one of the greatest fears of any human being. But all these Prophets faced and overcame this fear, submitting to Allah's will and destiny, not with a passive acceptance but through action and choice— as we will see again and again in the story of the Prophet Ibrahim (*'alayhi-s-salām*).

All these Prophets come to active faith based on *‘aqeedah* and *akhlaaq*, which is exactly what the Prophet Mohammed (*salla-Llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said he came to affirm. I want to pause for a moment to look more closely at these words, as they are a window into understanding the inner reality of the hearts and intentions of the *Ambiyaa'*, and reflect exactly the character and qualities of the man, Ibrahim (*'alayhi-s-salām*) who we are speaking about today. *‘Aqeedah* refers to those matters that are believed in with certainty and conviction in one's heart and soul. They are not tainted with any doubt. The word stems from the root *‘aqada*, which conveys meanings of certainty, affirmation, confirmation, etc. In the Surah al-Maa'idah, it says:

LĀ YU'ĀKHIDHUKUMU-LLĀHU BI-LLAGHWI FĪ AYMĀNIKUM WA LĀKIŅ-YU'ĀKHIDHUKUM BIMĀ 'AQQADĀTUMU-L-'AYMĀNA...

Allah will not take you to task for what is unintentional in your oaths, but He will take you to task for (breaking) your deliberate oaths you have sworn in earnest. [5:89]

The verb translated here as “deliberate oaths” is *‘aqada/ta‘qeed*, which refers to determination in the heart. It may be said in Arabic, *‘aqada-l-habl* (the rope was tied, i.e., it was pulled tight together). The word *i‘tiqaad* (belief) is also derived from this root, and has the meaning of tying up and making strong. The phrase *a‘taqadtu kadhaa* means “I believe; I am convinced of it in my heart; and this is a rational conviction.” This conviction of the heart, believe that infuses the character, is what we see in the example of the Prophets. As Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*) tells us in Surah al-Baqarah:

ĀMANA-R-RASŪLU BIMĀ UŅZILA ILAYHI MIR-RABBIHI WA-L-MU‘MINŪNA KULLUN ĀMANA BI-LLĀHI WA MALĀA‘IKATIHI WA KUTUBIHI WA RUSULIHI LĀ NUFARRIQU BAYNA AĤADIM-MIR-RUSULIHI WA QĀLŪ SAMI‘NĀ WA ATA‘NĀ GhUFRĀNAKA RABBANĀ WA‘ILAYKA-L-MAṢĪR.

The Messenger believes in what was sent down to him from his Lord, and the believers (also). All of them securely believe in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers. We make no distinction between any one of His messengers. They [each] say, “We hear and we obey. Grant us forgiveness, our Lord, and unto You is the final destination” [2:285]

Belief (*‘aqeedah*) must be tied to character, so let us look briefly at *akhlaaq*. *Akhlaaq* is the plural of the word *khulq* which means disposition. “Disposition” is a faculty (*malakah*) of the (self/*nafs*) which unconsciously inspires activities. *Malakah* comes into existence through repetitive practice and is not easily destroyed. Practice and conscious effort create a character which, if persistent, will eventually produce a disposition. Thus, it is not enough to simply say “I believe,” but it must be practiced, tested, repeated, and tested again—as we see so clearly illustrated in the life of the Prophet Ibrahim (*‘alayhi-s-salām*).

“Although fitrah produces certain dispositions, man can surpass nature through free will and effort. While dispositions caused by mental faculties (i.e., intelligence, memory, mental agility) are not alterable, all others can change.”

Anas, the brother of Abu Dharr, is narrated as saying: “I saw him (the Prophet), he would enjoin the people to good character and conduct.” The Prophet also said, “The most complete of believers in iman (faith) are those who are best in character.”

This teaching of the efficacy of developing a character of faith, sacrifice, and submission is little understood in its applicability to our lives today. Few have even the ability to grasp the subtleties of establishing this as one's disposition. Yet it is my firm belief that in our tradition, the tradition of Tasawwuf, we can both find and live the meaning and eternal metaphor for life, conscious decisions, and the interface between the inner world and outer world through the progressive establishment of such character.

I hope that we can understand from the stories and example of the Prophet Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*), more of what is required for us to develop the trust and trustworthiness, love and self-sacrifice needed to be the friend of the friends of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) and to follow, in our meager ways, in the footsteps of a True Friend of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*). I hope our hearts are awake enough to really appreciate the essential uniqueness of the Prophets and the sacrifices they made.

TRANSFORMATIVE TESTS OF IBRAHIM (*'alayi-s-salām*)

When we read through Qur'an, we see how many opportunities the Prophet Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*) had, from his childhood to his old age, for submission and sacrifice. At an early age he goes through a transformative change, a realization of the power of the Unity of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*).

... NURĪ IB^āRĀHĪMA MALAKŪTA-S-SAMĀWĀTI WA-L-'ARDI WA LIYAKŪNA MINA-L-MŪQINĪN.

FA-LAMMĀ JANNA ʿALAYHI-LLAYLU RĀA'A KAWKABAÑ QĀLA HĀDhĀ RABBĪ FA-LAMMĀ AFALA QĀLA LĀ UḤIBBU-L-'ĀFILĪN.

FA-LAMMĀ RĀA'A-L-QAMARA BĀZIGHAÑ QĀLA HĀDhĀ RABBĪ FA-LAMMĀ AFALA QĀLA LA'IL-LAM YAHDINĪ RABBĪ LĀKŪNANNA MINA-L-QAWMI-D-DĀLLĪN.

FA-LAMMĀ RĀA'A-SH-SHAMSA BĀZIGHATAÑ QĀLA HĀDhĀ RABBĪ HĀDhĀ AKBARU FA-LAMMĀ AFALAT QĀLA YĀ QAWMI INNĪ BARĪ'UM-MIMMĀ TUSHRIKŪN.

INNĪ WA JJAHTU WA J^āHIYA LI-LLADhĪ FA-TARA-S-SAMĀWĀTI WA-L-'ARDA HANĪFAÑW-WA MĀ ANĀ MINA-L-MUSHRIKĪN...

...We showed Ibrahim the Dominion [of Allah over] the heavens and the earth, that he might be of those who are certain.

When the night covered him with darkness, he saw a star, and he said "That is my lord!" But when it set, he said, "I do not love that which sets."

And when he saw the moon rising in splendor, he said “That is my lord!” but when it set, he said, “If my Lord does not guide me, I shall be of those who are astray.”

And when he saw the sun rising in glory, he said, “That is my lord! It is the biggest.” And when it set he said, “O my people, I am free of what you associate [with Allah].” [6: 75-79]

The transformation from confusion to certainty illustrated by these four simple ‘*āyāt* of Surah al-Anam is critically important to our understanding of this Prophet and our understanding of ourselves. Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta‘aalaa*) says that He showed the Prophet Ibrahim His dominion over Heaven and Earth so that he might be certain (remember our discussion of *aqeedah* earlier). Through the Prophet Ibrahim’s own experiences—seeing the stars, the moon, the sun rise and then set—the Prophet Ibrahim graduates to a place of certainty, certainty in his belief, in his faith, and in his submission to Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta‘aalaa*). In this example we can take the celestial bodies (star, sun, moon) both as reality and metaphor for the transformation of his faith.

But let us not be deceived; the confusion or uncertainty that he experienced was a veil that was lifted by *tareeqah*, *ma‘rifah* and *haqeeqah* to reveal a permanent gift of Allah’s to him, and to all the Prophets. Just as an electron microscope lifts the veil of gross materiality to reveal the atoms that were always present and gave foundation to the material element, the stories of the revelations to and from the Prophet Ibrahim (*‘alayi-s-salām*) are testimonies to the Gifts of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta‘aalaa*) and the efficacy of his inherent character. They are characteristics that we all share, in some much smaller degree, but which are stimulated and activated in us by the stories, the revelations, and the lives of the *Ambiyaa’* and the *Awliyaa’u-Llaah*. A revelation is an uncovering that directs us to the one truth; hence *Kufr* is covering up that truth. The revealer of the Truth is our final goal.

**INNA-L-MAWTA-LLADhĪ TAFIRRŪNA MINHU FA’INNAHU MULĀQĪKUM ThUMMA
 TURADDŪNA ILĀ ‘ĀLIMI-L-GhAYBI WA-SH-SHAHĀDATI FA-YUNABBI’UKUM BIMĀ KUŅTUM
 TA‘MALŪN.**

Truly the death—from which you flee—is assuredly coming to meet you, and you will be brought back to the Knower of the Concealed and the Revealed, and He will tell you all that you have done. Qur’an 62:8

This transformation from confusion to certainty forms the foundation of the Prophet Ibrahim’s character; but we also see that this same certainty is tested again and again in his life, beginning almost immediately with his father’s rejection of his new understanding, as recounted for us in Surah Maryam:

**YĀ ABATI INNĪ QADĀ JĀA'ANĪ MINA-L-^cILMI MĀ LAM YA'TIKA FA-TTABI^cNĪ AHDIKA ŞIRĀṬAÑ
SAWIYYĀ.**

O my father! There has come to me knowledge which has not come to you, so follow me and I shall guide you on the path made even and straight. [19:43]

But his father responds:

**...ARĀGHIBUN AÑTA ^cAN ĀLIHATĪ YĀ IBĀRĀHĪMU? LA'IL-LAM TAÑTAHI LĀRJUMANNAKA
WA-HJURNĪ MALIYYĀ.**

**...Do you desire to reject my gods, O Ibrahim? If you do not stop I shall stone you. Leave me
[alone] for a good long while. [19:46]**

This is his father—who raised him, who he knows and loves—saying that he will stone him. In essence, he is facing the choice between his father and Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta^caalaa*). But the Prophet Ibrahim responds with patience and kindness. Already having put his reliance in Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta^caalaa*), he says to his father:

SALĀMUN ^cALAYKA SĀSTAGH^hFIRU LAKA RABBĪ INNAHU KĀNA BĪ HAFIYYĀ.

Peace be upon you. I shall ask my Lord to forgive you. Truly, He has [always] been kind [to] me. [19:47]

Not long after this, the entire community rejects him for his smashing of the idols and they decree that he should be burned. They made a hole in the ground and set it aflame, and it burned with huge sparks and immense flames. There had never been a fire like it. They put the Prophet Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*) into a catapult in order to throw him into the fire. At that time, Angel Jibreel came to him and said: ***“O Ibrahim, Is there anything you wish for?”*** He said: ***“I only wish that Allah be pleased with me.”*** The catapult was released, and Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*) was thrown in the heart of the fire. When they threw him he said, ***“Sufficient for me is Allah, and He is the best disposer of affairs.”*** Sa'id bin Jubayr reported that Ibn `Abbas said:

When Ibrahim was thrown into the fire, the keeper (angel) of the rain said: “When will I be commanded to send rain?” But the command of Allah was more swift. Allah said: “O fire! Be you cool and safety for Ibrahim!” and there was no fire left on earth that was not extinguished.

So again we see that the Prophet Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*) values the friendship and help of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta^caalaa*) over acceptance from the community and even over his own life. But as we know, this is not his last test. Later in his life, he and his family were walking from where he had settled, which is now in Palestine at the place of the Beir Saba, the Seven Wells at the edge the cultivated land, across the deserts

and mountains of Siin. Finally, they reached a patch of desert in the Arabian Peninsula, he with his wife and child. They sat in this horribly dry valley of black basalt. The only thing that was left there in that uncultivated valley that had no trees, no water, and no food of any kind, no sign of life was the ruins of a foundation left from before the flood of Nūh (*'alayi-s-salām*). These ruins were the remains of an ancient house founded by Adam and Hawa (may Allah protect their memory). The reason was Allah had decided this was the place for them to settle.

After the Prophet Ibrahim had helped his wife and child to dismount, he left them with a small amount of food, hardly enough for three days. He turned around and walked away, and Hagar ran after him. She said, "Where are you going? Are you leaving us in this barren valley?" And he didn't answer her but continued his walking. She repeated what she had said, and he remained silent. Finally, after a few attempts, she understood that he was acting not on his own will, but on the will of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*). She said, "Did Allah command you to do this?" And he finally answered, "Yes." Then she said, "We are not going to be lost, since Allah, Who has commanded you, is with us." Then Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*) invoked Allah by saying:

RABBANĀ INNĪ ASKAŅTU MIŅ DhURRIYYATĪ BIWĀDIN GhAYRI DhĪ ZARĊIN ĊIŅDA BAYTIKA-L-MUḤARRAMI RABBANĀ LIYUQĪMŪ AṢ-SALĀTA FA-JĀ-CAL AF'IDATAM-MINA-N-NĀSI TAHWĪ ILAYHIM WA-RZUQĀHUM MINA-Th-ThAMARĀTI LAĊALLAHUM YASHKURŪN

RABBANĀ INNAKA TAĊLAMU MĀ NUKḤFĪ WA MĀ NUĊLINU WA MĀ YAKḤFĀ ĊALĀ-LLĀHI MIŅ SHAY'ĪŅ FI-L-'ARḌI WA LĀ FĪ-S-SAMĀĀ'.

O our Lord! Truly. I have settled my offspring in an uncultivated valley near to Your Inviolable House, Our Lord, that they may establish salat. So make the hearts of people to incline to them and provide for them fruits that they may be grateful.

Ya Rabb, truly You know what we hide and what we proclaim, nothing is hidden from Allah in the earth or the heavens. [Qur'an 14:37-38]

What a beautiful *duĊaa* he makes here in Surah Ibrahim, accepting Allah's command and asking for the protection of his family, even as he leaves them behind. He doesn't know what will happen to them; reason and rationality say they will probably starve or die of dehydration or heat exhaustion. All he knows is that he is following Allah's command. Who else could have said that? These were tests not just of the Prophet Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*), but tests for all who loved him, who depended on him, and who followed him.

Hagar's faith and his *du'aa* were answered. We know the Angel Jibreel (*'alayi-s-salām*), revealed the means in the form of the well of ZemZem, and they guaranteed once again that the valley would be settled. Ismail grew into puberty under the eyes of Hagar and among tribes, tribes who were attracted to the valley by birds flying overhead, because there was water. One might think that this should be it; that would be his last trial, that Allah would not test His friend and loyal servant. But we will remember, of course, that then comes the message to sacrifice his son Ismail (*'alayi-s-salām*). We are all familiar with this story but what is important here is that this was another test of his submission, his patience, his trust in Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*).

What appears to us as a test may also be seen as a 'revelation,' an unveiling to a Prophet and to us. For in each of these tests and each of these Prophets we too see degrees of typical human responses: repentance in Adam (*'alayi-s-salām*), questioning in Nuh (*'alayi-s-salām*), hesitation in Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*), anger in Musa (*'alayi-s-salām*), and an initial confusion and disorientation in the Prophet Mohammed (*salla-Llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*). Hence we can see these 'tests' and 'trials' as opportunities, crossroads of faith and submission, as they were clearly intended to be by Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) who says in Surah as-Saaaffat.

INNA HĀDhĀ LAHUWA-L-BALĀA'U AL-MUBĪN.

Truly, that was a clear test [of both his submission and obedience]. [37: 106]

The certainty, the idealism, the conviction that Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*) felt as a young man looking at the night sky so long ago must surely have been tested again and again: as he was rejected by his father, as he leaves his wife and son (possibly to die) in the desert, when he is asked to sacrifice his son. Yet he passes these tests, not because he devalues life or doesn't love his family, but because he loves them, because he loves Allah and knows that loving Allah, serving Allah, obeying Allah is more important than him or his family, more important than life or death.

THE LIBERATING POWER OF SACRIFICE

There are those who hear these stories and hear only of hardship, pain, and sacrifice. But I think we have all had a little knowledge of hardship, pain, or loss in our lives; and thus, I hope we also have had the opportunity to personally learn that the day-to-day sacrifices and tests are also a means of turning away from evil and selfishness and toward Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*), toward an inner (and outer) life of peace and tranquility. Like Sidna Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-salām*) and Sidna Ismail (*'alayi-s-salām*), we too are afforded the opportunity to have faith. We too are tested, and we too can try to rise above selfish desires to the level of love that transcends what is common and acceptable.

I hope that as we recount these stories and lessons today you do not hear it any way other than as deeply personal. I pray to Allah we can all apply these lessons to our life today and to our decisions tomorrow. At some point, we are all asked to give something up, to choose what we value over what we want, to choose between our self and Allah, between this life and the next. And like the Prophet Ibrahim (*'alayi-s-*

salām), sometimes the more we choose Allah, the more opportunities we are given to re-choose, to re-focus—to re-affirm our certainty.

We live in a world of virtual reality in which we can experience from afar the actual lives of people who are very distant from us. Pick up a magazine; go on line to a news site; read the accounts of war, torture, financial ruin, fears, rebellion, rational and totally irrational thinking and acting. Humanity now gathers daily in our TV's and our computer screens. These accounts, these narratives, these tests and trials—here, there, in cities and countryside of Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, China, the Congo—all these are reflections of the sacrifice and choices our father the Prophet Ibrahim had to make. What we must understand from this is that life is a series of opportunities to trust. None are as great as the opportunities given the Prophet Ibrahim, but we can find the place of “Ibrahim” and “Ismail” within our own self; a place that responds, as Ismail did: **“Allah willing you will find me patient.”**

To do that, we have to understand something that is perhaps a little disconcerting: we have to understand the liberating power of submission and sacrifice, the liberating power of absolute selfless service. We must not only understand, but also consciously embrace the reality, even though at times this brings some level of change and discomfort. These tests and trials are not about momentary discomfort, but about the perpetuity and sustainability of love, faith, trust, and humility. Students have often asked me: “Do you ever get to a point on this journey where you can stop striving, stop struggling, stop sacrificing?” While there are certain stations that can be achieved, which once achieved, the seeker can't fall below, the reality is that all life is a process of striving – striving for strength, submitting to the elements, creating and supporting the next generation, the fruit of life. Truly, it can become a quality of our character, no longer a negative aspect of life, but rather an opportunity to affirm the One True Divine Presence.

Surely, when we look at the lives of these great Prophets we see that they were given test after test. Asking when one can stop striving is like asking when one gets to stop eating, or sleeping, or breathing. Certainly, a station can be achieved in which this is less important, but only in the next world do we completely transcend this necessity. And thus, I return to my opening point about these messengers and their relationship with mortality. Theirs was a relationship not with death itself, per se, but with eternity—with the Unity of Allah (*Subḥānahu wa taʿālaa*)—Allah the true goal and the True Friend. Why, then, do we find it so difficult to understand our own place in this process? Why can it be so difficult to sacrifice our individual selfish nature to the very same objective? Do any of us really believe we will not be called upon to make hard choices eventually? Even if we can dodge this sacrifice or that opportunity, another one is on its way. And yet we still struggle to make even the smallest selfless choices.

In accepting the positive and inspiring aspect of sacrifice itself—embracing sacrifice—we are following in the footsteps of Sidna Ibrahim (*ʿalayhi-s-salām*). We are embracing the love of our kin and our fellow beings in our love for Allah (*Subḥānahu wa taʿālaa*), and empowering and preparing others for life and worship of Allah (*Subḥānahu wa taʿālaa*). We are accepting the immediate and complete relationship with our own destiny, with our Creator, a relationship that liberates our minds and hearts from the illusion of self-importance. This tends to be hard for most people. We can all identify with the difficulty of this challenge. It is not about living for our selves. Our self-interest is valid only insofar as we continue striving to maximize our potential and our creativity for the purpose of sustaining life for future generations to seek that very same Truth.

It can be difficult for us to de-condition ourselves from our ideas and fantasies about life. We tend to think in very materialistic, personal, career-oriented ways that somehow make us believe that Allah's plan for us is other than perpetuating and striving toward knowledge; other than sustaining of our community; other than focusing on our faith and the worship of Him in our actions and hearts. But, indeed, that is what it is about. That is what it is what it has been about since the beginning of time. Abu Hurayra reported that the Messenger of Allah taught this by saying:

This world is the prison of the believer and the paradise of the unbeliever. [Muslim]

Each generation has the opportunity to live this lesson: to live in harmony with the creation, to build upon the previous generation's work, to meet the tests that come, that finally, if passed, liberate us from the sense of distance and loneliness from the Creator. Yet each generation tends to miss that opportunity by transferring the ultimate goal to something worldly and temporary. That is not to say Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta'ālaa*) did not provide us with the appreciation of His Creation. That is not to say Allah did not give us the joy of work, or the sweetness of love, or the ability to feel fulfilled. Quite the contrary, all are part of the 'consciousness' that separates human beings from the rest of creation, and that enables us to improve upon the conditions of others, to work to sustain life, and growth, and to embrace knowledge and create wisdom, and to pursue nearness to Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta'ālaa*).

Trees cannot get up and move because they don't like the place they are in. "There is more sun on the other side of the stream; I'm going to move over there." Birds have very regular migration patterns. But we have this ability to make changes. We can even influence changes in the bird's migration patterns through pollution and global warming. Our power to change is our blessing and our curse. Every one of those benefits—the sweetness of love, the feeling of fulfillment, the joy of work, the joy of just seeing someone on occasion—have tests and trials that come along with them, small ones. How do our challenges compare to any one of the tests of the Prophet Ibrahim? To live and struggle or to thrive in the conditions and situations we find ourselves in is the basis of all our trials and tests. Embrace them!

FINDING THE INNER PROPHET IBRAHIM

The stories of the sacrifices of Sidna Ibrahim have many facets. But today I hope I am discussing what I see as their relevance to us in a real and necessary way for the world we find ourselves inhabiting, a world that demands our conscious participation, not merely being present in the physical sense. We—Muslims, members of Tariqah, of this family, sitting in this *jam'at*—must embrace the greater community, not the lesser self, the greater love, the greater courage, the joy of giving and of patience, the pleasure of service, the study and the wisdom, and liberating joy of perseverance and self sacrifice.

Remember; this is not theoretical today. We must learn to participate in the greater struggle; we must find the inner Ismail and the inner Ibrahim. We must truly understand how to see the life we have been given, and moreover to see the place we have been placed, and the service we have been receiving and giving as the greatest means to personal and spiritual, collective, and individual fulfillment, maturity, and awakening. These opportunities that we are afforded by Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta'ālaa*) should not be turned away from. Don't avert your eyes from those opportunities. Even the smallest and seemingly

most individual ways, ways that asks of us limited sacrifice, limited discomfort, may very well be the ultimate keys to our happiness and overcoming of our most basic weaknesses.

Is there one among us who doesn't have a weakness? Ask yourself what discomfort can I tolerate? What difficulty can I bear that could relieve the discomfort of another person? What act or word of self-protection or self discomfort can I abandon in order to create harmony and avoid discord, create an environment of relief instead of an environment of tension, of support instead of abandonment? These small sacrifices are the subtlest and the most profound means of personal transformation. This attitude of putting the self last, the acts of service, are what makes Sidna Ibrahim and Sidna Ismail, all the *ambiyā*, all the *awliyā* not just Muslims, not just *mu'min*, but *murād*, the dearest friends Allah. Truly, acts of humaneness, acts of love and appreciation, acts of gratitude to Allah by service and gratitude to a brother, a sister, a friend, a parent, the guide and the fellow guided—even a small and sustained low level of sacrifice, nothing as monumental of those of Sidna Ibrahim—is a balm for the soul, a staircase to transforming the *nafs ammaarah*, a way of preparation for life.

From our childhood we should learn this, a preparation for life by bearing and embracing these small sacrifices and services. For a child, it might be carrying the plate to the sink and washing it off, making the bed, putting the clothes away, deferring to the parent or sibling. This is a teaching for us adults, also. Each one of us has small sacrifices to make, small opportunities. But sometimes we think of them as big burdens. They are preparations for work, for marriage, for parenthood, for sustaining friendship, for journeying further and further within...in the *baatīn*, for a life here and (for those of us older and further along in life) for a life in the Hereafter. Why should we, we who have lived this life as Sufis, as Muslims, *inshaa'a-Llaah* as *mu'minuun*, allow ourselves any level of selfishness when we can easily be changed by small discomforts, for brief periods of time, or minimum effort of service?

This time, today, is an opportunity for reflection on our own service and sacrifices. This, right now, is *our* opportunity to strain a bit, and struggle to see our self as part of a larger community—this community, this family, this or that *tareeqah*. Take a moment to reflect. Think about what your opportunities are to show and to live your Islamic and, if you are of *Tareeqah*, Sufic values. Don't say, "If I do this, then I don't have to do that. If I make this small sacrifice, then I can avoid that greater sacrifice." Don't think like that. Just think about what opportunities are at hand: today, tomorrow, next week, next month, during your life. What can you choose to do to be selfless? A small sacrifice. Allah is not asking you to walk through fire, or to destroy your parents' way of life; Allah is not asking you to take your child and your wife to the desert and leave them. Take a moment and think about the sacrifices you can make, the sacrifices that your "inner Ibrahim" would make.

GIVING AND RECEIVING

I yearned for years for the guidance I have just given you, on the importance of sacrifice; and then when I got it, it took me years to appreciate it. As you know, we hear only when and what we choose to hear; the rest is wind through the leaves of the tree. Who among us rises to the occasion, sees and seizes the moments when we perceive the need or the opportunity to assist our husband, our wife, our child, our parent, our brother and sister, our friend, our guide, let alone our fellow traveler? Who even looks to see what their need is? Or are we too focused on our own needs, our own problems, and our own challenges

to see or consider the needs of others? Or, if we do see them, we brush them aside: “Me? I have no way to assist,” or “If I am needed, I will be asked; I will be told how to help.”

I remember sitting one day with my Shaykh, Hazrat Azad Rasool (*alayhi rahmu*), and I had noticed for days that he had holes in his socks, because I was praying behind him. I was thinking, “Oh, he has holes in his socks.” And then one day he turns to me and says, “If you know anyone going into town, could you ask someone to get me some socks?”

I said, “Oh, I saw that and I wanted to get you some socks.” So we get him some socks, and he has money in his hand.

“*Astaghfiru-Llaah*, I can’t take it” I said.

“But you have to take it.”

“Hazrat, I cannot take your money. I saw you had holes in your socks, and I was going to get you socks anyway.”

“But, you didn’t. So if I ask for something, I pay for it. If you give it, it’s something different.”

He calmly, peacefully, says to me, “But you didn’t, and if I ask for something, then I pay for it.”

Listen carefully, because I am telling you what I have learned. Truly service and sacrifice seem to be opposites. But to the Sufi, to the truly humane being, personal spiritual gain (and even worldly recognition at time) comes bountifully from both. Sidna Ibrahim and Sidna Ismail exemplify this. There is a relationship of love and trust, illustrated in their mutual respect and concern. When the Prophet Ibrahim reveals his experience in sleep...some say dream, but the word is *manama*...in the bed, or by extension, rest or sleep. The element of doubt exists, since dreams can be deceiving. He asked his son his advice. Remember, Ibrahim was man who gave advice to his father, now he turns to his son and asks him for advice. How old is his son? An adolescent, Qur’an says, “old enough to work by his side.” And he says to his son:

INNĪ ARĀ FI-L-MANĀMI ANNĪ ADhBAḤUKA FA-ŅDhUR MĀDhĀ TARĀ?

Oh my son, I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you; so look, what is your view?”
 (37:102)

And his son replies:

YĀ ABATI IF^cAL MĀ TU’MAR: SATAJIDUNĪ IŅ SHĀA’A-LLĀHU MINA-Ṣ-ṢĀBIRĪN.

Oh my father, do what you are ordered. By the Will of Allah, you shall find me steadfastly patient.” (37:102)

Patient—not willing, not brave, not resigned—but patient, persevering. He could have said, “I’ll be courageous. I’ll be strong.” But he says, “**By the Will of Allah, you shall find me steadfastly patient.**” Certainly this is big patience, but can we not apply this to our own lives? Seeking and finding this inner station of patience is an important goal, but it is predicated on transforming our own disposition, our own inner reality in order to even contemplate grasping the inner Divine Presence. In Surah ar-Ra’da Allah praises

...ALLADHĪNA ṢABARŪ IBĀTIGHĀA’A WAJĀHI RABBIHIM...

...those who persevere in seeking the Face of their Lord... [13:22]

Striving dominates this process of perseverance as we realize it is an impossible task in material and even metaphysical terms to actually “see” Allah. We can learn to ‘see’ by the light of Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*), the Divine Presence, the light in all creation and within our self.

As I have pointed out many times, this process is an inner process that results from our intention, our attitude, our practices (*salah*, etc) and then manifests outwardly quite naturally as our character, *ʿaqeedah*, and *akhlaaq*. To be an enlightened being according to the Qur’an is to be a *muḥsin* (a doer of good). It is recorded in this *ʿayah*:

WA MAN AḤSANU DĪNAM-MIMMAN ASLAMA WA JĀHAHU LI-LLĀHI WA HUWA MUḤSINUŅW-WA-TTABAʿA MILLATA IBĀRĀHĪMA ḤANĪFAŅW-WA-TTAKḤADḤA-LLĀHU IBĀRĀHĪMA KḤALĪLĀ.

And who can be better in religion than one who submits his essential being to Allah; and he is a *muḥsin* and follows the religion of Abraham—hanifa. And Allah did take Abraham as an intimate friend. (4:125)

Muḥsin is the turning of one’s inner life to the reality of Allah. So we see the affirmation of the essence of Sufism here; *mutawwajuh*, the turning away from outer distraction to inner tranquility (*sakeenah*). Abdullah Ansari writes of patience:

Patience is observed over afflictions on account of (true) love and it produces three things: one-sidedness of the heart; discerning knowledge (ʿilm); light of sagacity.

The patience of (or abandonment of) sins is due to fear of Divinity Almighty, and it produces three things: intention in hearts, acceptance of the supplication, light of cleanliness.

The patience over (or indulgence in complete) obedience is due to hopefulness. It also generates three things: disappearance of the calamities, grant of sustenance unexpectedly, inclination toward virtues.

How can we better practice patience (of any and every kind) in our life? What about today when you go home, or tomorrow when you go to work? What in our character can we focus on, ask assistance with to change, bring true patience and perseverance to, so that the larger trials may be met with ease and trust and faith and patience? Or will we continue to go along the road of hopeful ignorance and arrogance, or fearful avoidance, as some of us do. We don't want to rock the boat too much; so we wait for that test that we can't avoid, and hope that we will somehow find a cache of patience, selflessness, and perseverance in that moment. Not having to prepare for it at all, will we wait for the big test to come and say, "Ah, now I'm going to be ready for it"?

But we can begin to prepare today. For a second time I ask you to pause and think about this. Do you have something that requires patience in your life? Do you avoid things or people because they make you impatient? Just as there is the wisdom of Solomon, there is the sacrifice of Ibrahim.

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SMALL SACRIFICE

These events in the life of the Prophet Ibrahim have not been forgotten for over 3 millenniums. That in itself is amazing. Yet in the moment when we are anxious and seek to avoid discomfort, we forget not only the lesson of our forefathers, but of our own experiences or teachings. From one challenge to the next we forget until our next discomfort or personal disturbance comes, and we look around for help, and pray to Allah (*Subḥānahu wa taʿālaa*) for relief. For a moment we may appreciate the *madad* of our *shuyukh*, our *shaykh*, and the kindness of our spiritual family. Then again we forget or separate our needs from the needs of others. We must strengthen our faith and trust in Allah (*Subḥānahu wa taʿālaa*), in the Prophet, and in our *shuyukh*, for this is the step by step way to uplift our soul, and awaken our hearts, and see with the eyes that see.

It is easy, in the maze of issues that demand our attention and time, to lose sight of the small and meaningful (and transformational) opportunities for service and sacrifice. Sometimes, just maintaining minimal spiritual balance is the greatest challenge to imagine the immensity of the trust and submission of Ibrahim. What most of us are being tested and tried by are momentary discomforts and difficulties. But not one of us has been asked to go by horseback, camelback, or by foot from Palestine to the basalt mountains of Arabia. In comparison, we are asked for small sacrifices. If we seize the opportunity to make conscious decisions to turn toward Allah as the Prophet Ibrahim did, then we begin to see with eyes of devotion and attend to the commands of Allah (*Subḥānahu wa taʿālaa*).

We are interrelated by our devotion and our attachment to the Ummah. We are bonded together by being part of humanity, and part and parcel of this community and the larger community of those who serve. This was affirmed by the first statement of the first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad:

IQĀRA' BĪ'ISMI RABBIKA-LLADHĪ KHALAQĀ. KHALAQA-L-'IŪSĀNA MIN ʿĀLAQĀ.

Read in the Name of your Lord Who created, created the human being from a clot. (96:1-2)

Created from a "clot," *ʿalaqa* uses both the biological reality "to hang, suspend; what is precious," and the larger metaphor of *taʿalluq* "attachment, bond, devotion, relation, affiliation, devotion, affection" to

describe both the physical and the subtle reality of our existence and our relationship. The Prophet Ibrahim and his son of blood and flesh are united in a bond of trust and submission to Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*), a relationship that, in this example, transcends their blood relationship. We learn that Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) is not interested in the blood and flesh, but only in the act of submission, in the willingness to make personal sacrifice and trust. This has always been the message. As Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa taʿaalaa*) clearly explains in Surah al-Hajj when speaking of another sacrifice:

LAŅY-YANĀLA-LLĀHA LUḤŪMUHĀ WA LĀ DIMĀA'UHĀ WA LĀKIŅY-YANĀLUHU-T-TAQĀWĀ MIŅKUM...

It is not their meat or their blood that reaches Allah. But it is your consciousness of Allah and your warding off evil that reaches Him... [22:37]

This is the message of Sidna Ibrahim: to make a small or large sacrifice, to affirm our trust and trustworthiness, to remove a weight or a worry, to uplift a friend or a loved one, to serve our community, brothers, sisters, *shuyukh*. I used to rack my brain and tear my heart apart to find ways to serve my Hazrat, materially and spiritually. The material part was easier. The greatest joy I had was to relieve a burden from his heart and mind. Maybe it was to just to listen to him talk about not wanting to pay off the people to get a phone line in India, or how to deal with the neighbor who wanted a gate behind the place, or how to get the workers to come; let alone the *murīds* who abandoned him, and the pain that it caused him, to the point he couldn't write the letters. He asked me to write the letters to these people, because he couldn't utter a criticism easily from his mouth.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I reiterate that this message of certainty of faith and of self-less sacrifice is a critical and essential one for those who wish to move along this path: a path at times mysterious, and at times difficult; but attested to and affirmed by those who came before; those who passed their tests, and who live on in our knowledge and hearts, and in the stories we recount today. I hope this message has been heard. May Allah forgive me for it being an incomplete and poor re-telling.

Allah is greater; and in that greater-ness is the transformative moment, the possibility for a paradigm shift, a moment within an individual and society that may be, at this time, beyond the horizon. But if we strive within our self, if we assume our responsibility as children of Adam, as children of Ibrahim, if we embrace the challenges, choose selflessness, and sacrifice just a bit more, it may make the world a bit more just. It may draw attention to the inequities and immoralities of human interaction, state sponsored terrorism, the absurdity of violence poverty and unnecessary politicized exploitation of people.

The most constructive way for the Sufi to contribute to the manifestation of a better world is to seek personal transformation, and promote social harmony within our own friendships, our own family, our own *Tareeqah*, and community. Just as the popular phrase today is "all politics is local," so too all spiritual progress is personal. It begins (and ends) with one's self discipline, refinement, and relationship

with Allah (*Subhāanahu wa taʿaalaā*). Don't be distracted or tricked into not seeing the importance of a moment; everything is opportunity. Every day is practice for tomorrow. Today let us begin anew. Each one of us has an opportunity, or ten opportunities. Make that small sacrifice and maintain it, as it is truly a gift of Allah (*Subhāanahu wa taʿaalaā*) to be a reliever of burdens by good deeds.

Is this too simplistic a message? If it is simplistic, then fulfilling it is simple. If remembering, which is the foundation of progress as a Muslim, is easy for you, *alhamdulillah*; if it isn't so easy, well then maybe the message is not as simple as it seems, as simple as it is to articulate. In a *hadith qudsi*, Allah (*Subhāanahu wa taʿaalaā*) says,

I have decreed My Obligation and have reduced the burden on My slaves, and I shall reward a single good deed as if it were ten good deeds. (Book #54, Hadith #429)

May Allah enable us all to sacrifice in His Way to the best of our ability, and to remember the depths of the story of the Prophet Ibrahim and Ismail (peace and blessings be upon them both)! *Inshaa'a-Llaah*, we can reach to that point each day where we wake up and realize that life is not about accumulating; it is about sacrificing, and we can re-define sacrifice without that aura of pain and loss that comes always with it.

Hasbuna l lahu wani'ma-l-wakil. Ni'ma-l-mawla wani'ma-n-nasir. Wa'ufawidu 'amri ila-l-lahi' inna -- laha basirun bil-ibad. 'Inna waliyyiya-l-lahu-l-ladi nazzala-l-kitaba wanhuwa yatawalla-s-salihin'.

Allah (*Subhāanahu wa taʿaalaā*) **is our sufficiency, and good is the trustee, the best to protect and the best to help. My own affair I commit to Allah** (*Subhāanahu wa taʿaalaā*), **for Allah** (*Subhāanahu wa taʿaalaā*) **ever watches over His Servants. For my Protector is Allah** (*Subhāanahu wa taʿaalaā*), **Who revealed the Book, and He will befriend the righteous.**

Rabbi 'akmil li dini, wa'atmim 'alayya ni'mataka, wa-j-'alni 'abdan sakuran, abdan karima.

O my Lord, perfect for me my religion, complete Thy favors upon me, and make me a devotee most grateful, a devotee most generous.

**ALLĀHU LĀ ILĀHA ILLĀ HUW.
AL-HAYYU-L-QAYYŪMU LĀ TA'KhUDhUHU SINATUÑW-WA LĀ NAWM.
LAHU MĀ FĪ-S-SAMĀWĀTI WA MĀ FI-L-'ARD.
MAÑ DhĀ-LLADhĪ YASHFA^cU ^cIÑDAHU ILLĀ BI'IDhNIH.
YA^cLAMU MĀ BAYNA AYDĪHIM WA MĀ KhALFAHUM.
WA LĀ YUHĪTŪNA BISHAY'IM-MIN ^cILMIHI ILLĀ BIMĀ SHĀA'A.
WASI^cA KURSIYYUHU-S-SAMĀWĀTI WA-L-'ARD.
WA LĀ YAŪDUHU HIFDhUHUMĀ
WA HUWA-L-^cALIYYU-L-^cADhĪM.**

[2:255]