

February 11, 2009

Wednesday

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Title: [When Does Our Responsibility Begin?](#)

DVD title: Allah Wills for Us Knowledge, Power and Choice
Discovering the Middle Position between Command and Choice

Dinner Blessing: O Allah, You Who have sweet rivers flowing and fruits of every kind and beauties of all kinds of tasty and wonderful surprises for us in Jannah, You have given us a taste of these in our meals and our world here. We ask You, Allah (Swt), to provide even the most basic things to everyone in our country, O Allah (Swt), everyone in the world, from Your abundance and from Your bounties. O Allah (Swt), humble those who cheat and steal and who are ignorant of the pains and the sufferings of those who are obedient to You, and who work hard and who strive for the small pleasures of life that You have provided for us. I ask You, Allah (Swt) to take the sword of Ali and to cut away the injustice and to cut away the hypocrisy and give us a new beginning, O Allah (Swt) by Your will. Show us the presence of the Mahdi, not in one person, O Allah, but in the manifestation of the virtues and the goodness of life and the goodness of the hereafter. Heal those among us who are ill and protect those among us who are traveling and give cover to all of us, O Allah (Swt), in the storms and the vicissitudes of day to day life. *Amin.*

I have been trying to explain the Hikam, and three or four things [from it] in one hour, but of course it opens up five thousand hours of issues and questions, especially about *qadr*. There are some interesting stories that give us pause to think that come out of our lineage,

especially from the lineage of Imam Jafar Sadiq. At the expense of being called a Shi'a, I will discuss something free of sectarianism, but just logical and reasonable, maybe. On the other hand, I think it is logical and reasonable because it sort of explains accountability.

Accountability seems to be a subject of the day and age. So I think, as long as they have to be accountable in Washington, we don't have to think about being accountable here. Maybe we do know the difference between right and wrong, and maybe we are somewhat responsible for that; and perhaps (as I think at this moment in my life), it falls within the reality that Allah (Swt) is all knowledge and our *qadr*, our destiny. Obviously, human beings have some power. If you do not believe that, go eighty miles an hour on 29 going to Washington and see if the police have any power or not.

Power is something that we are not unfamiliar with. Usually, it is structured around some kind of rules or laws which supposedly derive from some concept of right and wrong or justice—if not that, safety and security, either for ourselves or for others. That is pretty Islamic. One expects the people who have the power to use the power in a just and righteous way, or else, in the case of Democracy, they are removed from power. Or the power is removed from them, which eventually happens to all of us. But I think that there is truly a middle position in all of this, which is one of the reasons why Allah (Swt) calls us to, enjoins us to be the *ummata'wasit*. An example was given by one of the *shuyukh* that we know the difference of being on the roof and falling down, or being on the roof and climbing down by the ladder. Obviously, climbing down by the ladder is done by our own will and our own power and our own *niyyat*. We know that our own actions in life should be more under our own power or choice than by some accident or something that

is beyond our power. I am not going to get into the nuance of that because that takes us into things like, “Why was the roof slippery.” So we are not going to do that tonight.

In other words, some of our own actions should not be attributed solely to Allah. Though all of our actions take place within the purview and the will of Allah. The will may be and usually is, in this way of thinking, the will of Allah for us to have choice. Our choice is to be based on a choice to follow certain guidelines. So the guidelines are provided for us to choose to follow, and all this is a means of bringing us closer to remembrance of Allah (Swt). That is the simple way of explaining it. Certainly there are some of our actions for which we get credit or even we get praise, and certainly there are some actions in which we get blamed or our value is diminished. Then there are certain things that we do, which are neither praiseworthy or blameworthy. We just do them.

Some say that the first way is within our power and the second way is outside of our power. I don't think that is necessarily true. I will give you the example this way: you can come to me and say, “Shaykh. I have the following symptoms.” And I go into the book and my knowledge and my experience and I say, “Take Nux Vomica, three doses.” You take it because it has been proven that I have some small amount of knowledge in this area, and I am using good books, and I can read, and I have some experience and you take it, and you feel better. Now if I say to you, “Thank you for telling me. Go home and get better.” I can tell you what to take within a certain system, but I can't tell you to go home and get better. The treatment is within a certain power or knowledge. But getting better is outside that sphere of capability, except where it intersects the knowledge and the choices I am able to make and the choices you are able to make to follow that advice or not to follow that advice.

In this way, we are shown that there are certain things that are within our power and our will. Then we get into the subject of *irāda* and *niyyat* and how to utilize that power, that will and those intentions—but some aren't. There are some things that we can be advised by text, by Qur'an or by Hadith, or by *salat* or by teachings of the *shuyukh* in some way, or knowledge. There are some within our power to accept and to utilize or not, and there are some things that are not. Of course, Shar'īah comes under that category of advice, and we have been enjoined to do certain things and not to do certain things and to obey certain things and not to obey certain things. We are told that if we obey certain things within the Shar'īah, then *hamd* comes to us, we are praised. Whatever praise you get, Allah will mention your name in a higher company. In other words, the system responds to what is good.

So it raises certain issues, which you will hear me discuss in the Hikam, those issues about wrong actions or hardship and how they are blessings of Allah. In terms of even the modern situations that we are facing in the economy, the questioning today on Capital Hill, bear out the understanding or the truth that even though Allah possesses knowledge of the human action, and indeed, *for* knowledge of the human action (it is written), Allah doesn't compel us to act in any particular way, but gives us the choice to act in certain ways; therefore, Allah creates all the teachings, and all the *anbiyā*, and all the revelations, and all the examples of people's lives, and life and death as a means of choosing and choices. That in no way means that we are totally independent of Allah (Swt) and in fact the power and the will *to* act is given to us by Allah (Swt).

Imam Jaffar Salik said, "*There is no compulsion by Allah. Nor is there any absolute*

delegation of power from Allah to man. But the real position is between these two extremes.” Al amr bainal amrain: command and choices. What is this middle position? Because there is no compelling, people are free to act as if there is no value system. They are free to even act. They are not compelled to act by Allah. The assumption is that if you have the well-being of humanity or others in your heart and your mind, and you are submitted to that as your way, and you have guidelines for that—it could be the Injil, the Torah, the Qur’an or the Constitution—then you are compelled by righteousness and by goodness, not by some concept of an external compulsion.

Take for example the possibility that a person is injured. In the kinds of wars we have now, people lose their limbs, right? So let’s say that a person loses a limb. Let’s say [that it’s] a hand [they lose]. They fit the person with a hand that has a battery in it that when the battery is activated allows the person to use the hand. Let’s say that it is activated by remote control in some way. Of course you would need another hand to do that. But let’s say that the doctor keeps that. So when he switches on that hand, the man can use the hand in any way he wants to, and when it is off, he cannot do anything with his hand. Now if the device is on and the patient does anything, can that work that he does be attributed independently to him, totally? Well, the power comes from the device and the device is under the control of somebody else. Can it be attributed to the doctor? Well the doctor has control over the device, but he does not have control over what the man does with his hand, because he has choice.

So we are not under the compulsion or the will totally, and yet the choice is ours. We are not totally independent, because the power we have to do anything we do comes from Allah (Swt). Now we can have a talk about whether the power is on all the time or not. I

tend to think the power is on all the time, but that is only my tendency. Then comes the question: At what point does our responsibility really begin? At what point does our ability really start? Well, one of the *shuyukh*, Imam Khaizam (the Shi'a call him Imam Musa), said a very interesting thing. He says that it takes three or four conditions to fulfill how a human being acquires the ability. One is that when there is nothing to hinder the human being's plans, there is nothing standing in the way of your intention, your plan, your choices. Second thing is you need to have the health to do what you are going to do and your faculties. And [third], your capabilities have to be up to the standard for you to do whatever you are planning to do. If I told you right now that I was going to do 20 push ups, I couldn't do it, because I pulled my deltoid. I couldn't do it. So why would I try? And the fourth is that Allah (Swt) provides the opportunity to do what you want to do. So when these four conditions, he said, are met, then a person is able to act by his own free will in a specific way.

There sure is a case here for understanding the value of elders with knowledge who have achieved some real knowledge and experience as opposed to being elected over and over again. What's the goal? If the goal is anything other than the remembrance of Allah Swt. If the goal is Jannah, or the goal is to avoid Jahannah (hell), there is a problem. If the goal is to be in awareness of the Divine, and there are so many reports in Hadith [about this.] The Prophet (sal) was asked, ***“What is the most beneficial thing a person can do?” “To keep his tongue moist with remembrance of Allah.”*** There are so many examples that [tell us that] this is the penultimate thing to do; therefore, let everything be a reminder of Allah Swt.

We can look at *qadr* in these terms. The question arises: Can you believe that everything

is pre-ordained or pre-destined, and at the same time, believe in a day of judgment? If Allah decrees every single act which is done, then why should there be any punishment inflicted upon people, since whatever you are doing is by the will of Allah Swt? If our evils, our sins, our transgressions, our wrong actions, whatever they may be, a lack of belief in unity, are pre-destined, then why would Allah be so unjust? On the other hand, as it says in the Hikam, if all these actions are allowed to play out to a certain degree, they may be a means of remembering Allah and avoiding that punishment. That is also by the will of Allah.

*There is a story that Abu Hanifa went to meet Imam Jafar a-Sadiq (may Allah send His blessing upon both of them). While he was waiting for him inside his house, a small child came out. Abu Hanifa, in conversation with him just to pass the time, and knowing this child was somehow related to Imam Jafar, asked him, "O child, from whom is the action of man?" And the child said the following: "O Abu Hanifa! There are only three imaginable sources. Either the man himself is the originator of his own actions, or God is the doer of that action. Or both together are the originators of the action. Now, if Allah Swt is the doer of the actions, why does He inflict punishment on a person for his sins? Is that not injustice? Allah says, **'Truly Allah is not unjust to His creatures.'** So why would He say He is not unjust to His creatures, and then be unjust? And if both man and Allah Swt are partners in the actions, then is it not gross injustice that the powerful partner, who is Allah, punishes the weaker being for an action which both of them performed together? As these two alternatives are obviously somewhat illogical, perhaps the third is correct: that a man*

performs his actions by his own power and his own will, granted to do that by Allah.” He has accountability. Abu Hanifa kissed his head. He turned out to be the Third Imam.

Of course, Abu Hanifa never really accepted that point of view, but that’s okay. In fact, as the story goes, he was once speaking to his *muridīn* and said,

There were three things I heard Imam Jafar say that I disagree with. First of all, he says that Allah cannot be seen, but that’s wrong. If a thing exists, then it has to be seen. Second, he says that Shaytan will be punished in hell, but that’s absurd. Shaytan was made of fire, so how can fire burn him? And third, he said that a man’s action was done by his will and power and he is responsible for it, but that’s wrong because all the actions of man are done by Allah’s will and power, and Allah is actually responsible for it.

Now, in the group was a man named Bahlul. Everyone got all excited and began to praise Abu Hanifa for saying this. But Bahlul took a piece of clay (not his shoe) and threw it at Abu Hanifa and hit him on the forehead. He cried out in pain, and was really hurt. He was angry and took him to a judge. The judge heard the complaint and asked Bahlul if what he heard was true. He said, “O Judge! Imam al Hanifa said he is suffering from pain in his head because the clay hit him there. But I think he’s lying, because I can’t believe until I can see the pain.” Abu Hanifa said, “You are a madman! How can I show you pain? No one has ever seen pain, just the results from pain!” Bahlul said, “But your honor, he was teaching his disciples that it can be seen. And he can’t show the pain, so I submit that

according to his own belief, he is not suffering any pain at all.”

Abu Hanifa said, “My head is splitting because of the pain!” Bahlul said, “Your honor, this is another matter which I just remembered. He was also telling his students that Shaytan is made of fire, so the fire cannot do him harm. Now, your honor, man is made of clay as Qur’an says, and it was a lump of clay which hit him. So how can he claim that a lump of clay did any harm to a man who is made out of clay?” “O your Honor,” Abu Hanifa said, “Who wants to go scot free by his words? Please take my revenge on him!” Bahlul said, “I think Abu Hanifa has brought me wrongfully into this court. I just remembered that he also told his muridīn that all the actions of man are done by Allah, and Allah is responsible for those actions. Now, why did he bring me here if he really is suffering from the effects of that lump of clay? He should sue Allah, who hit him with the clay. Why should a poor, harmless person like me be brought into court, when all I’m supposed to have done was in fact done by Allah?” And he was acquitted.

Certainly we can entertain the thought and the possibility that Allah has empowered us to have responsibility, and to live by certain measures, and though Allah cannot be seen, the effect of His presence can be seen. And though pain cannot be seen, the result of pain can easily be seen. Though blame is attributed to the person who made the choice, the person who made the choice and the reality of blame comes from Allah Swt. But how do we remember it? That’s what I’ve been trying to explain. Perhaps, it is what we keep coming back to: that Allah Swt created human beings with a purpose, because nothing in creation is without purpose or meaning, and without relationship to something else. That purpose is to acquire the qualities and virtues of Allah Swt; the names and attributes of Allah

which would bring us nearer to Allah. Really, it means to be aware of that presence of Allah Swt.

Though we have said we come into this world with a blank page, perhaps it may not be as blank as it seems. Perhaps it may be blank, but the page lands in the hands of certain people for specific reasons. The virtues and blessings are like beautiful pictures on the page. The vices and evils are like scary drawings. Allah says in Qur'an, **“Blessed is He who created death and life, so that He may try which of you is best in deeds.”** (67:2) We have wisdom and we have power. We can acquire some degree of direction and control over those attributes that are implanted in us as our *fitrah*. The right path is shown. It is articulated and revealed. There are examples of it and there are warnings. But at the same time, we are not being compelled to do what is good, nor what is bad, except by our own inclinations and compulsions, which is another part of the story. We do have the power to do good. We do have the power to do as we wish.

Allah says, **“I swear by the soul and Him who made it perfect. Then He inspired in it the knowledge of right and wrong. He who purifies it will indeed be successful. And he who corrupts it indeed will fail.”** (91:7-10) When we talk about it, at least in me, it seems very clear. When we try to apply it, it gets a little more difficult. When we judge by it, it gets pretty frustrating, because the greatest of the virtues of Allah Swt is not His power, but His compassion and mercy. I think it is pretty true to say that if anything is done by anyone in power that doesn't also have virtue of compassion and mercy somewhere attached to it, that person is neither fulfilling the will of Allah, nor acting as a human being should act. *Asalāmu aleikum.*

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Student:

I was reflecting that something really good needs to happen in this world, change for the things we are faced with now. I was wondering if it is really possible for human beings to go into the world of command and bring back something that will change the world.

Shaykh:

To really gain the knowledge to understand the scripture that has been revealed to them, all comes from the world of command. Especially in Islam, it tells you how to deal with the world of creation—especially. In fact, maybe, a lot of the potential that brought this man into power (President Obama) was because of the strength of the *fitra*, and the underlying yearning to go into that world of command, and reaffirm certain values and virtues. [It is a] heavy responsibility, and, you know, you are betting the house on it, so to speak. If the guy is a fraud, that is the last nail in the coffin because then you never know what the truth is until the day of Yawmi al-Qiyama. The idea is to avoid the analogical Yawmi al-Qiyama.

If you are talking about the world situation, unfortunately, I think a lot of it has to do with personalities as opposed to believers. It would be good if there were real people who really believed and were pragmatic and open minded, and saw the unity of belief. At least for the foundation of decisions wouldn't be superficially religious. It would be based on real, real faith. If we didn't believe that everyone could change and wake up, that their virtue was stronger than vice, and that repentance was real, we wouldn't be sitting here. We would all like to believe that this is what he is trying to do. Get people to return to core values. But at the same time, it would be nice if we could just go forward. Anything else?

Student: I was confused by some things you said in the discourse.

Shaykh: Do you believe our choices, our ability to choose comes from Allah? (Yes)
Do you believe Allah tells you every choice to make? Do you believe that Allah, some distant God who is as near to you as your jugular vein, tells you every choice to make? If so, what is the point of choice? Do you believe that Allah (Swt) has given you, has revealed not only the means of choice but the possibilities and the results of certain types of choices, and yet gives you the power to choose or not to choose? Which one do you really believe? Do you believe it but act differently than you believe, like many of us do at times? Do you believe something when you are asked to believe but your actions belie your belief? Not because you intend to be a hypocrite or a *munafiq*, but because you haven't the will yet or the intention or the fear/*taqwa*. Where does that value, that possibility come from? Just from human beings? No.

If you wanted to have the Hanafi point of view, it comes from Allah, no? Does that preclude that you make choices every day? Have you made any bad choices today?

Student: I chose not to do my prayers on time.

Shaykh: Do you feel guilty about it?

Student: think about it, and remember Allah.

Shaykh: That is the Hikam. This causes you to remember. I don't think that it is a good idea to purposefully choose not to do something so that you remember. Why don't you just go to the root of that. If you can remember Allah, you could not remember Allah. You could not remember Allah or you could remember Allah. It is by the will of Allah that you can do either one of those things; therefore, choice means something. Otherwise, it does not mean anything. If everything comes by Allah, then there is no need for choice.

It is just that choice is like a game on your Blackberry that you can play when you have nothing else to do. Are you thinking by your will or by Allah's will? Your capacity to think is by the will of Allah. Your choice to think about it is by your will. Or is Allah willing that you think about it but He is trying to fake you out and make you think that you are choosing to do it; otherwise, life would be boring and we wouldn't like it at all. But then we would have to have ego. *Nafs* has to be there.

Is there *nafs ammāra*? In my life, I have certainly experienced it a number of times. I do not think this is complicated, because the simple thing is to use the laws of complexity to take the apparently intractable and make them tractable. In other words, it is possible to have a way out of situations and even want to use it but not use it correctly. Why? Because we have choice. What is influencing our choice? Certain bias and certain conditioning. Things we have been talking about for years. How we exercise that choice is by Allah's will.

But if Allah is making all the choices and you are making choices and they are the right choice or the wrong choice, Allah is making the wrong choices? For what purpose? There is no purpose. The point of view is that Allah created a whole universe and then went off to Jamaica—that is a point of view. Allah set this whole thing in motion and then took a vacation. He is going to come back at a certain time and close it all down. It is like walking away from your computer, doing a bunch of other stuff and coming back and shutting it down later. I don't happen to ascribe to that. The reason I don't ascribe to that is because if I look around and I see happiness and I see beauty and I taste things that are sweet and I see goodness, I don't think Allah is not present. I think Allah is present. Aside from the fact that He has said He is present. So He couldn't possibly have gone

anywhere. He has said, **“I am as near to you as your jugular vein.”** And **“I am in the heart of the believer.”** So unless I am in Jamaica with Allah, Allah is here with me. Right? And I am using logic imperfectly because I am an imperfect human being. I am using logic and reason, which in and of its own self is imperfect. Right? But that is a gift of Allah (Swt) to me. So I should use it to whatever degree I can use it. Not to prove that I am right, but to address the question that one who cares about understanding would ask.

Of course, if you do not want to be totally responsible for anything you do, think or act, think or do, as a consequence of everything you do, you can maintain this point of view that Allah is to praise and Allah is to blame, as opposed to understanding that praising and blaming are qualities that Allah (Swt) has created in order for us to understand what is virtuous and what is not virtuous. But it brings you nearer to awareness of them. I can always say things like bringing you nearer, but it’s awareness of that Divine presence. Unfortunately, you will hear in the Hikam, the metaphors that we tend to use are not really..... but we feel comfortable with them.

Like the example of the [metaphor of the] path. We are on the Path and we are going from here to there. Well, it is fine [to use it but it is weak]. In *dunya*, we have to think that way, because it is a linear world. But in reality, we are going from here to here, in the sense of unveiling, realizing. But since we do move in the world, we are going from here to there. That metaphor we can relate to, because we have all gone in the right direction and we have all gone in the wrong direction. We’ve made a left turn instead of a right turn. We can understand the metaphor, but it is a weak metaphor. It does not really reflect the “Truth.” Does it? It’s late. *Asalaam aleikum.*