

March 11, 2009

Wednesday

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Title: [Islam: Present Now](#).

Islam, Qur'an and the Sayru-l-Suluk:
Present and Revealing, Moving and Migrating, Inwardly and Outwardly

Dinner blessing: O Allah, we have many things to be grateful for this week since last we met in this room for a meal: the successful, *insh'allah*, operations of our brothers Shaykh Nooruddeen Durkee and Sidi Abdel Hādi Honerkamp, may You give them long life, health, wisdom, and humility as the basis of this experience. And all of us pause to think about the transiency of human life and the importance of every day. O Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta'ālā*), we have You to thank for good news today, good meetings today, good insights today from our brothers Musa and Khaled, and also the good news we got today about our work. And we are happy to be in Your service, that You deem us worthy of such service. There are those among us who are not feeling well. We ask You to re-roof their house so they don't need any more shingles. We ask You Allah to create clarity in the hearts and minds of believers, and to understand the value of this way and this path. And how merciful, kind, and giving You are to us. Give us *shukr* and *sakina*, and give us *saf*, and give us *sabr*. Amin.

Sohbet: *Bismillah*. My dear brothers and sisters, in this time of the Mawlid of Prophet Muhammed (*salla-Llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*) we can talk about a couple of things I think are important. One is an offshoot of this concept that I was putting forward the other day on remembering. Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta'ālā*) tells us, “And remember when...” “Remember when I did this? Remember when I divided the sea for you? Remember when We took

your *amanat*?” [He is] saying to us this in the present tense as if we were there: “When the *amanat* was accepted for all of time, remember you were present.”

We don't think of ourselves as being present. In fact, we think of religion (specifically) and spirituality (to a lesser extent) as something that is in the past, and we are somehow keeping it alive. Our progenitors started something, and like it or not, this is what we have. All of the reference points are in the past. Somewhere along the line you hear things like, “How come there aren't any saints today? Where are the prophets today? Where are the great masters today?” They were conveniently a long time ago and we don't really know anything about them. Along with that, people ask the question: “What's the point of putting your mind in the past? We should look to the future. Why should we be concerned with what happened a millennia or three ago? Put the past behind you.” Why is Allah always asking us to remember the past?

It's an important question. If you understand the answer to the question, you understand Islam. You understand the reality of the Qur'an. It is not an historical, linear text, story after story, like the Torah or the Bible or the *Injil*. It is not a history book. It is something quite different. It views both history and reality in interesting ways. Certainly, there are stories about what happened in previous times. But there is always this sense that somehow we were present. We say, “Remember when I first met you? You were barefoot, had those overalls on, and you were walking up the road.” We remember it in the past because we were there, present. How is it possible we can be present here and now, and then?

That's a very critical understanding of how Allah (*Subhānahu wa ta'ālā*) teaches us through

the Qur'an. Especially if one can hear the Qur'an—if not read it in Arabic and understand it, we can all listen to it—it has many different rhythms, patterns, and movements in it. If you were plotting it out as music, you would see there are andantes and allegros and crescendos and fortes and mezzo fortes and pianissimos. There are repetitions in it, and certain phrases are repeated. There are reflections, remembrances of previous melodic lines, but they are not exactly the same. Some of it lifts you up and you forget where you are. Some of it makes reality all that much more real for you. We interpret it in our own hearts and souls to the degree that we listen to it. In that sense, it's like a poem that sticks with you because it comes at a meaningful time in your life, and it reminds you of something you do know.

At the least, the Qur'an reminds us of something we have experienced in our life, which is exactly the lesson it is trying to teach us from an apparently historical point of view. But we were present for that lesson. It is the self-same lesson. That's the least. I happen to be of the school of thought, at least now, that we *were* present—our souls were present. Even if you don't necessarily accept that, in the presence of certain moments of your life you have had certain experiences, which are reflected in the teaching of Qur'an. So in effect, you were present for that teaching. That's one thing. It also reflects, as you know from what you've heard of the systems talk, that it reflects certain natural laws, and certain realities at work in society and in the universe. Those laws and historical realities give us a sense today of the rise and fall of civilizations and nations and what caused it.

We can see the same pattern in the actions and attitudes of people today—forewarnings or forebodings. The Qur'an exists to say, “Here is the truth. Here is the template which you can put down on things.” This is the criteria by which you can measure and understand

what is happening in your life and your world, how things grow and how they flourish and die, and decay. It's also a transmission of truth. The idea is if you could implement what is to be implemented, and refrain from what is to be refrained from, then human beings will grasp what life is about, and grasp the way to break away from these repetitive patterns and conditions of time and space, and enter into another paradigm that transcends the limitations of these cycles.

One shouldn't look at it as an historical text only. Certainly there is history in it. Select a few stories, a few of the revelations: the story of Sidna Musa (*'alayhi-s-salām*) is not terribly long. The story of Sidna Yusuf (*'alayhi-s-salām*) is not long, nor the story of Hazrat Maryam (*'alayha-s-salām*). They are not long stories in the Qur'an, but they give us a more crystalline understanding of the intention, not just the history or story itself. The patterns that tend to dominate human history and life are made very succinct and clear in the Qur'an.

Therefore, we have the ability, if we can look at them and understand them, we can understand the real boundaries of history and the necessity to move forward. Having said all that, movement itself is very important to a Muslim and Sufi. Not that they are different; but some people think they are different. Movement is exemplified by the Hajj and the Hijra.

By the way, the Hijra is very interesting because the question comes, "Why is the Muslim calendar based on the Hijra? Why isn't it based on maybe the day the Prophet (*salla-Llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*) enters back into Mecca? Why is it not based on the time of the first revelation?" There are many events like that. Why not when he won a certain battle? Why the Hijra? It's because everything in Qur'an and the life of Prophet Mohammed is based on movement and transitions, shifting. The small group of fragmented people who were

following the Prophet all of a sudden coalesced in Medina. They became a society. They became a real community, with all of the necessities of a community. He became not only a religious prophet and leader, but the secular head of government and state. He becomes a ruler over people who were Muslim and non-Muslim—not just non-Muslim Meccans, but Jews and Christians. Therefore, it is also not just a movement from Mecca to Medina, but a movement from being a religious prophet and teacher, to a secular political and social leader, and a military leader. It also is a transition from a small group of people, not much larger than this one, to a massive influx of people into Islam; from having to be a leader of a small band of people to being the leader of a very rapidly growing group of diverse people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

A certain universal law seems to apply, articulated recently in modern times by Ali Shariyati, the Shi'a philosopher, which was that all civilizations arise on the heels of migration. Look at the Exodus. The Jews were living in Egypt, then they exited and went to the land of Israel and became a civilization. If you want to look at America as a civilization, it all comes from people migrating from Europe. And civilizations are destroyed by dispersion and fragmentation. You can talk about many civilizations here in North America also, the Native American and others.

What I think is important to us at this time in the world is to realize that values and truth are not limited by one period in history; rather, it is a dynamic reality. The rules and customs of one society cannot dominate and control the vastness and truth of the revelation of Qur'an. The Arabicized Salafi expression of Islam, or the Indo-Pakistani view of culture in Islam, or any one country's view of Islam is very limited and restrictive of Islam. The whole story of Islam was one of integration of different ideas and groups at

the beginning. That's just on the external level. The other thing is the *sayr ul suluk*—the migration from the state of ignorance to a state of knowledge. As above, so below. What is external is what is internal. What we see manifest in the world is again an example, a metaphor, or a description of what takes place inside of us. If we pay attention and turn our attention to our inner selves, it moves us away from entropy. It moves us away from stagnation. It moves us toward an awareness of Allah.

When we talk this concept of movement, add to it the more mystical (esoteric perhaps to some people) aspect of our soul's presence at the moment of revelation, and add to that the fact that the Qur'an is constantly being revealed due to circumstances. As you read Qur'an and it applies to you, Allah is revealing it to you. We take these elements together, and we can begin to understand that the Hijra of the Prophet (*salla-Llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*), outside of its historical reality, makes it relevant to all times. It is also a description of what is happening to us as a seeker on the *sayr ul suluk*, this inner journey.

In that inner journey, one is dealing with the *nafs*, like dealing with the *Qureysh* or Abu Sufyan, Hind, or the countless people who persecuted the Muslims of the day. These are the manifestations of the *nafs*, the ego, of not wanting to change, holding on to convenient ideas, or practices that brought in money to Mecca. Last night, for the Mawlid, I read about the Prophet's life (chapters 5-6 from Martin Lings' Muhammad). [In the Prophet's life] you see all the relationships: of the Prophet with the *Sahaba*, with his own tribe, with his wives. They all represent different characteristics and attitudes, different experiences and challenges that we meet in the inner journey in the *sayru-l-suluk*, migrating from the state of ignorance to a state of awareness.

Allah says in Qur'an: **“Those who migrate toward...”** We see there are many layers and levels of meaning, social and religious, personal and political that are articulated in historical form, but they reflect what is [happening] today. You can say that every religion and philosophy has that. The human being is able to interpret that, take a piece from here and put it there. Of course that's true. First of all, Allah revealed these religions to people, and of course they should have it. Islam does it in a very crystalline way, a very refined way. If you know the history and the stories, if you are aware of some of the nuances of the stories (which are very interesting to read from an historical and religious point of view), then when circumstances that are similar come to you, you see the relationship much more easily. You can go to that story and read it and say, “Ah, this really applies to me.”

But beyond that, remembering what has happened as being told in Qur'an allows us to formulate for ourselves the same principles as they apply to our life. Especially as a Sufi, a person on the path of Tasawwuf is very much led by their heart, not just the mind or intellectual understanding, which is quite limited. When the heart becomes involved, one holds the experience very close, very dear. When the heart perceives the Haqq of Allah – in the Qur'an the phrase is **“the mind of the heart”**– then that knowledge lives in us and through us.

We have to change our attitude. We are not participants in some historical religion we have adopted for the sake of certain practices, or certain ability to have a name called a Sufi or Muslim, or to be part of a social community or even a religious community. But we have to allow ourselves to see what we have adopted as being very functional and realistic and utilitarian, and also personally fulfilling. To do that, we have to move away

from the traditional historical idea of religion. We have to allow it to live in us. Why Sufism is so incredibly important to this process is that the Sufi always approaches Islam from the heart, from the point of view of the community. The Sufi approaches in the form of the *rahmat* of Allah, and doesn't allow themselves to get only mentally or intellectually or ideologically involved.

The Sufi approaches it from the heart and from the state of understanding why Allah swt created the human being. And consequently, you could say that the Sufi is like Johnny Appleseed, who goes around the world planting apple trees. Why does he plant apple seeds? It's in the song (sings): *"O the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the things I need, the sun and the rain and the apple seed."* It's about *shukr*, gratitude, spreading the seeds of gratitude. And [it is] to recognize where I am in this. *"Here am I near the blue, blue sky, doing as I please. Singing with the birds and humming with the bees. And everywhere I go, another seed I'll sow. And one day there'll be apples there, for everyone in the world to share. The Lord is good to me."* That's a Sufi principle. It lives in Johnny Appleseed in the 1800's, and some other people in the 1700's, and others in the 1500's and 1400's and in the 2000's, and in 2009. It's not about being free to wander and plant apples everywhere. It's the gratitude. Wasn't that the turning point for the Prophet Mohammed (*salla-Llāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*)? When Aisha (*radiya-Llāhu 'anhā*) said, "What are you doing? Your feet are swollen from standing in prayer. Why are you repenting? You are *masūm*." And he said, "Should I not be grateful to my Lord?" Planting the seeds of gratitude.

When we read Qur'an and think about the life of the Prophet Mohammed (sal), we should be remembering from our soul's memory. We should allow ourselves to remember, and

get out of this old habit—especially among Muslim Americans who were not brought up in Islam, but who embraced Islam—that it is historical religion. Of course there is an historical line, but that’s not the key that opens the door. The prophets were witnesses to the truth, and their message to us is the message that is alive today. Even the Qur’an tells us: **“Truly, this is no less than a message to all the worlds.”** (81:27) It’s a timeless message. It’s to everyone, to all the worlds, universes. It’s an interesting thing. What was spoken and written down in parchment and carved into clay and written on rocks and little scraps of papyrus. It was all written by certain people in a certain time and place. But what was written is not limited by time at all.

This whole idea of movement and migration, inner and outer, is symbolic. The Hajj symbolizes bringing all these people together in one place. The Hajj symbolizes bringing all the different cultures and races and economic levels together to create a kind of unity in that diversity, or as I prefer it, diversity in that unity. It represents that dynamic movement every year. It represents the whole of human purpose and existence, keeping that diversity, but gathering in a unified purpose in one place. That place physically is Mecca, but the non-physical place lies within the heart of the human being.

Allah alone knows how we are all migrants. We are all immigrants. Now you see, even in our society, this being played out. People are migrating from their homes to tent cities, because they lost their homes. Now they are immigrants. It is happening in cities all around us. This story gets repeated over and over again. It’s so compelling that it should demand our attention. We have to somehow resolve to understand that these events don’t exist only in the past. They exist right now in the present. What does it mean to be present in our own time and place? You have seen it written: the living Qur’an. The

living truth. We have family memory of these events. Who is the family? Hazrats Adam, Ibrahim, Musa, Aaron, Isa, and Prophet Mohammed (*salla-Llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) (peace be on all of them), and all the messengers and *shuyukh*.

When you measure distance and time, yes, it’s a long time . When you measure distance in respect, love, meaning, or relevancy, there’s not very much distance between them, and between them and us. Prophet Mohammed (*salla-Llāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) was the key that opened the door to this understanding. And He revealed to us that **“Allah is as near to us as our jugular vein,”** and **“remember Me and I’ll remember you.”** And if you are looking for Me, **“you will find Me in the hearts of the believer.”** **“I will speak through your lips, work through your hands, walk through your feet.”** **“Wheresoever you look, there is the countenance of Allah.”** **“Allah is the Lord of east and west.”** He is present.

Prophet Isa (*‘alayhi-s-salām*) said it too: *“When 2 or 3 gather in my presence, I will be there.”* It’s an historical teaching. It’s a reality. Maybe you have to force yourself to accept that as a reality. But once you say, “That’s the way I’m going to look at things,” then you’ll start seeing it. How many people have spent their whole lives under the beautiful skies of this earth, looking at the stars, not understanding anything about what they were looking at, but still they were in awe of it? When you start to understand about astronomy and what these things are made of, and talk about distances and time... you are seeing the beauty but also having knowledge of what it means. Yet, you also know there are very many questions that remain unanswered about what you are looking at. This is the attitude we should have toward the Divine presence. When Allah is present, we can see Allah is present and understand certain things about it. We can name certain things.

Allah taught Adam the names of things. Because he did, what have I said about it? Why did he tell people the names of things? What does it mean that he taught the names of things? He was describing the human being's own self.

This is a key, if we understand how our memories and experiences can color us in one way or free us in another way. Let me ask you a question. When did Allah tell Adam the names of things. What was the date? (It was before time). Yes. Was there creation at that time? (We don't know). Where was this class held? Turkey, the Middle East? (Not in this world). Ah, in the *malākut*, paradise/*Jannah*, or at least in some space between. Was there time as we know it in that space? Of course not. I'll let you play with that idea. *Asalaamu aleikum.*

Did anyone come up with a memory of what I said about the names? (The names manifest from our self.) He is giving us the tools to understand the reflection of the Divine presence within our own selves. So with that knowledge, all kinds of things can be derived.