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Saturday

Title: **Al-Birr: Righteousness**

DVD title: Al Birr: Righteousness, Relationships, and Kindness
The Honor and Opportunity of the Spiritual Quest

Recently, I spoke on *birr*. I want to remind you that it is a very difficult word to translate from Arabic. Usually it is translated as righteousness. [Regarding] these commentaries that I'm making on the writings of Allaudin Attar (ra), one could look at them from the perspective of a person who can reduce their ego and their reactive nature, their *nafs ammāra*, to one of obedience and service—and [try] to understand how that is a liberating state as opposed to a confining state. What is confining is when you see all these Muslims confining themselves to what *they* call the *maqasid sharī'ah*. When they confine themselves to the law, to the rules and regulations, in their company, all you feel is constraint and confinement, narrow-mindedness. It is not that the laws are bad or the rules are wrong, but they have not evolved from the inner being. Their behavior is top down.

Prophet Mohammed (sal) was asked a question by [a Companion]. **“He said, ‘I came to the Messenger of Allah (sal) who said, ‘You came to ask about *al birr*.’”** He didn't ask what his question was; he told him what he came to ask. What we are talking about is the state of mind that allows you to know exactly what's on someone's mind and what they are going to say next. **“I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘Seek the answer in your heart. *Al birr* is that which your inner self feels good about, and that which your heart feels good about. *Al ithm* is that evil thought which crosses your mind and which is persistent in your inner self, even if the people give you a fatwa time and again allowing what you feel unease about.”**

How is it possible that Prophet Mohammed (sal) knows about the *fatwas* that are going to be given by the people, none of whom yet have the authority to give *fatwa*? Unless I'm missing something. Who had authority, at the time of the Prophet (sal), to give *fatwa* other than him? No one had the authority to give *fatwa*. First of all, there was no formal *Sharī'ah*. There were no institutions. They didn't even know how to pray until he prayed. There was no instruction on prayer at that time. It was just following the leader. How did he know this? That's the point I'm trying to give you *tafsir* on six centuries later. In the lives of these great *Khwaja Khwajagan*, who were not hung up, who were good Muslims, who followed the *Sharī'ah*, who followed the *Sunnah*, who were scholars and founded universities, but they followed their heart. They were Sufis. They were *mu'min*. Ibn Hajar al Tami (ra) said of this *hadith*:

This hadith is among the Messenger's unique speeches and one of the richest in meaning. Al birr is a unique word that entails each and every act of righteousness and piety. As for al ithm, it is also a unique word that entails each and every act of sin and evil, whether major or minor. This is why Prophet Mohammed (sal) gave a contrast between the two words, treating them as antonyms.

We know it means obedience and truthfulness. You can find it in the dictionary. It also means what? Here is why I am telling you, with a great deal of reluctance, about the lineage of Prophet Mohammed (sal) to me, sitting here, 34th in two lines, and 33rd in another one. I am telling you this with a great deal of reluctance. Righteousness is related to relationships. This word also means to keep good relations and to be kind. It also means to be grateful. It has the implication of *shukr* in it. Kind with whom? Kind with your acquaintances, your friends. It means Islamically and Sufically to be kind with those

you keep company with—*suhbat*. Do you want to know who to be kind to? Look around. It starts with me. It's hard for me to say this, but I'm telling you this, because it's not me as a person. It's what I symbolize: 33 lines back to the Prophet Mohammed (sal). I didn't ask for it. I didn't claim it.

If you don't think lines are important, ask anyone anywhere in the world how important their relatives are: Christian, Jew, Hindu, animist, it doesn't matter. Everybody knows that your lineage is important. When you have a genetic break in your lineage, like some of you have (I'll save the pejorative terms to describe some of your relatives), you know it is very, very painful. It is painful to look at someone in your own familial line and see that they are lost, or they are disturbed, or they are disbelievers or whatever. It's hard for some people in this room to relate to that. We Americans have this wonderful privilege of being able to relate to this much better than Mitra or Dedeh, or Dina or Khaled. This is a family line, make no mistake. What makes it powerful is that it is not a blood line. You have no excuse other than the word of Allah. It is by Allah's word. Can anyone doubt, other than the relationships that were blood relationships between Abu Bakr ni Siddiq (as) and the Prophet (sal)? We understand the relationship with Ali (as) or Umar (as).

[*Al birr* means] to be kind with the company one keeps. It also means to obey. Righteousness and listening in the heart to what is good also has to do with your relationships, your obedience, your attitude, or the types of good behavior combined with your good conduct. Prophet Mohammed (sal) affirmed that in a number of *hadiths*. One *hadith* was reported by An-Nawas Ibn Saman (ra) in which the Prophet (sal) described *al birr* as good conduct. And another *hadith* by Wabisa defines it as "that which your inner self feels good about." In *Sūratu-l-Baqarah*, Allah uses the term *birr*.

It is not *al birr* that you turn your faces toward the East and the West

in prayer. But *al berr* is the quality of one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives his wealth, despite his love for it, to the orphans, and the kinfolk, to the poor, to the wayfarer, and those who ask. And sets slaves free and performs *salat* and gives *zakat*, and fulfills their covenant when they make it. And who are as *saberīn*, the patient ones in extreme poverty and in ailment, and at times of fighting during battles. Such are the people of the truth. They are *muttaqun*. (2:177)

That's how big this word is. Everything in *Suratu-l- Baqarah*, 'āyat 177 tells you [that] *al berr*, which is your relationship, and your submission, and your obedience, and your love, and your respect, is what positions you to live according to *Sharī'ah*. Isn't that *Sharī'ah*, according to "the Five (Pillars)," plus the other Five (beliefs)? Do you understand what I'm saying?

In Qur'an, Allah says, **"Help you one another in *al berr* and in *taqwa*."** (5:2) He puts the two together. **"But do not help one another in sin and in transgression."** (5:2) In this case, *al berr* means to treat one another with kindness, while *taqwa* means piety and to obey Allah in what He has commanded and refrain from what He has prohibited. Sometimes it means to practice what you are obliged to practice. *Taqwa* means to avoid what is prohibited.

I will continue with *al berr* again, because I want to set the stage for what we are talking about. It is not just the *tafsir* on somebody's writing, or some Sufi's writing. This is how you come to the state of mind where you see and hear and know like Prophet Mohammed (sal) knew. It has to do with not just living a righteous life, whatever that means. It means living your life according to Islam, but it also means how you relate to people, how

you obey Allah. [It means] how you understand the relationships of this Prophet Mohammed (sal) with his *Sahabah*, with the company he kept, and how those relationships formed the foundation for what later comes to be written down as the *Sharī'ah* and *hudūd*, and the *'ulūm* two hundred years later.

This is all work on the inner being. This is all a way of testing one's aspirations, Allaudin Attar (ra) said. He was making this point to whom? He was making this point to his companions, to his *muridīn*. They may not have been sitting wearing Hagar pants, or designer clothes from Turkey, or whatever. They were just his companions like we are companions, whether or not they are capable of managing their inner sphere of development as well as they could operate by their own will in the outer world. None of you have any problem operating in the outer world. Right? Most of you don't have any problem operating in the outer world, do you? You get up; you go to work; you go to school; you go to your business; you see your clients; you see your patients. No one has any real trouble. In the inner world, well, in the inner world, we are all on disability. We all qualify for spiritual disability. That is sad, isn't it?

We don't have any problem working in the outer world. You just do it. You bite the bullet. You do what you have to do. You get up when you have to get up. You go to work when you have to go to work. Right? Put food on the table. But the inner world.....you can't see it, so you don't have to pay any attention to it. It is like the elephant in the dark. What is it? An elephant is flat and it flaps back and forth. The cause of any advancement that a person makes, and the means by which they pass (as I told you at the end of last time) from mastery of perfection to mastery of spiritual action (from *kamil* to *maqam*) begins with things we have been talking about, and certain practices, one of which is practicing silence. People are very suspicious when you are silent and thinking. "What is the matter?" "Nothing." "Well, you seem to be thinking."

Hm. “I’m sorry.” “Something must be on your mind.” “Can’t see it.” “What are you thinking about? Why are you thinking about that? Why is that important? You should be thinking about this, not about that. If you were thinking about this, then you would be thinking about that. Why are you being so silent?”

Silence for a Sufi has three things. One is that silence wards off dangers, he tells us. In silence, you can hear the heart remembering Allah. In silence you can learn to see the spiritual states that you have achieved, or not. But there are certain dangers also that we must be aware of. We must be aware of the whispering: the ideas that invade your heart randomly. They are not really, for the most part, obstacles to your perfection, unless you let them settle in your heart. You have to have a way of cleansing your heart. Things that come in: negative thoughts, negative attitudes, whisperings, worries, disrespectful things that flow in your heart—these are natural. But if you let them settle, you must shake the branch so that the bird does not sit comfortably on the branch. Obviously, it is almost impossible to distance yourself from things that are negative or dangerous, totally.

Allaudin Attar (ra) says:

I was suddenly invaded by a natural and trifling instinct which I had denied for a period of 20 years. But it could not take control. The ability to prevent dangers is a very difficult business. According to some, they have no value and no importance, and they cannot be considered at all harmful provided they do not penetrate the heart and nest therein. Otherwise, they block the channels of mercy and grace. From this perspective, it is always necessary to practice vigilant awareness of the states of one’s inner being. At the spiritual guide’s command, the murīd should also dispel dangers while exhaling his breath: La illaha il’Allah. The wisdom of deliberately dispelling the breath is that since every concept (thought) has a form, one

thereby evacuates the heart by exhaling the breath in the form of concepts presented by the dangers. That explains why it is necessary to adhere to this rule and to empty the heart of the dangers.

When you have these negative thoughts, they actually have a form. They can crystalize and become like a barrier to the *Fadl* and to the *Nai'mah* of Allah (Swt). The door once open becomes closed, veiled. So you have to breathe out—*la illah ha*—breathe out those negative thoughts, the anger, the upset. They don't rest in you.

It is very, very necessary to understand what a frustrating business this really is. I stand in the shadow of Bahaudin Naqshband (ra). Khwaja Bahaudin Naqshband (ra) said that as he came towards the end of his life, he was very disappointed with his efforts to train people. He said, *"These folks will not adopt and develop the benefits that accrue to them."* I can relate to that. The venerable Khwaja Naqshband would constantly reiterate, and I quote: *"Worship consists of ten parts. Nine of those parts being lawful livelihood."* He also used to say, *"In our own time, farming and horticulture comes closest after trade to meeting the standard required."* What are the things that were lawful in his time? He said, *"Farming and horticulture are closest after trade to meeting the standard required."*

I am absolutely amazed that he didn't say banking and investing! Now here comes why I started and where I came to. I started by talking about companionship and *birr*, and righteous acts. He says, *"Fellowship with Allah's people is the cause of abundance of superior intelligence."* *Suhbat*: this is a cornerstone. Fellowship is an important part of the example set for us by the Prophet (sal). Where does this concept come from? It comes from the Sahabah. It comes from the Prophet's relationship with his Companions.

And it is necessary to spend every other day in fellowship with the Sufi

community, and truly cultivate their modes of conduct. If there is sometimes an external separation, whether once in a month or once in two months, the seeker is obliged to inform the spiritual guide of his outer and inner conditions. Whatever the intervening distance may be, the pupil must ascend to his spiritual guide by way of imagination and be pre-occupied by him so that complete separation and neglect never come to dominate him.

Let's see: Monday dinner, Tuesday night off, Wednesday dinner, Thursday gathering, Friday *khutbah* (but night off), Saturday dinner and *dhikr*, Sunday night off. That works fine. Right? Don't feel guilty that you don't sit in meditation. It only has to be every other day. Every time I go sit in meditation, morning or night, I'm always thinking, even if only for a split second, of Hazrat who made it possible—even if it is for three seconds, always, always—because it is connecting. The spiritual journey, my dear brothers and sisters and friends, those who are *murīds* and *murīdas* among you – because not everyone is – the spiritual quest is such a high honor, such a high state. To even come into contact with those who are on the spiritual inner journey, the *sair ul suluk*, is a phenomenal blessing that few human beings ever have the opportunity to do.

Of course those of us who *are* in such contact take it for granted, and never think about the hundreds and millions of people who never even have the opportunity. It is such a high state that not everyone has the ability, perhaps, to travel on that journey. It is all within the will of Allah (Swt). Sometimes a person needs to wait. We don't push someone to be on this journey because sometimes, sometimes, as we are told by the Khwaja and others, there needs to be time for the capacity within an individual to develop to walk on this journey. Our predecessor said, *"What is acquired prematurely is quickly lost, because there is no understanding of its nature nor of its source."* You can force the children to do all their prayers and do all the Islamic things, because that is the foundation

that keeps the door open, but only at the right time can they be invited in. This goes for the adults too.

Now here comes the most beautiful part, or one of the most beautiful parts. I have said it to some of you, individually, over thirty years. I will tell you now again publicly, and in this case I will be quoting the teaching as it comes from Allaudin Attar (ra). You can find it from Khwaja Shaykh Bahaudin Naqshband (ra), and from countless of our predecessors. He says it this way: *“As I am prepared to guarantee, even if someone enters this path by way of imitation, taqlīd, he will still achieve takhtir, realization. Khwaja Naqshband instructed me to begin by imitating him. I am still practicing by imitation. Everything that I copied from him I will certainly see its affect and consequence one day.”* Now do you think that when he says imitation that he means that when Khwaja Naqshband (ra) was eating with these two fingers instead of these two fingers, he did it also; or that he blew his nose with this hand instead of that hand? Is that what he meant by imitation? When Bahaudin Naqshband (ra) said a certain sentence, do you think he just repeated that sentence like a parrot? Forget that craziness.

Are there any questions?

Student: When you said, “To attain to a state of friendship with Allah,” I never heard it stated that way.

Shaykh: What does that mean to you?

Student: I assume a personal relationship with Allah.

Shaykh: Is love a thing or a person? Is protection a thing or a person? [Just imagine] if something happened. Maybe you were driving along and you skidded. There were no cars around and you got the car straightened out, and nothing bad happened and everything was fine. But it could have gone badly. You could have seriously been hurt.

So you say, "Allah protected me." But did a cosmic hand come down and move the car? How did Allah protect you? How did you relate that to Allah? Or did you say, "Phew! Boy, that was close!" The Protection is a manifestation. We call that, we say, "*Ya Hafizu*" Is that a personal relationship? But by the friendship of Allah, He protected you. Protection was yours to be had. Why? Maybe many times you were protected, but you didn't know. You were just protected because of your *qadr*, your destiny.

Allah protected you without you knowing anything about Allah. But you know about Allah, and you know that one of His names is *Hafiz*. You begin to believe *Wadud* and *Hafiz* and *Rahmat*, some *justice* is served, *Ya 'Adl*, or whatever. You believe that. You see there is some kind of relationship. You assume that you are in favor, you are receiving the *Fadl* of Allah (Swt). You are in favor of Allah (Swt). Before it was happening, but you didn't know the source. Now you know the source. People say, "Oh thank you Allah." They look up as though Allah is up there somewhere. You are not thanking a person, but you are thanking a reality. Something happened. You were protected. You felt love in your heart.

Now in the car situation, it seems to be from the outside. In the love situation, it is from the inside. Your body is no barrier to this relationship. Don't get hung up with the personification of God, of Allah, because how is that possible? Yet Allah expresses those qualities through people and through circumstances. When you say, "I love you for the sake of Allah," that is because you really understand that love is Allah, and it is only by Allah that you can have that love.

Student: You stated that one should attribute all their states to the *shaykh*. My question is: is this referring to spiritual states (as opposed to worldly, emotional, psychological, physical states), and why would one attribute one's state to the *shaykh*, who is a human

being, and not to Allah, from whom all things come, and to whom we return?

Shaykh: That is the whole point of this whole thing. That is the point. This is also part of the discussion of the mirror. You look at the *shaykh* as if you are looking into a mirror. I cannot recap this whole thing. Maybe you should go listen to it again. Take it in terms of what I said tonight, in terms of *al birr*. If you understand relationships, try and understand this kind of righteous behavior in this circle of companionship. I will just make it personal. Never, ever did I walk in front of my Shaykh—ever. I might not have agreed with absolutely everything he said every time he said it, but immediately I would assume that I did not understand. Immediately I would be conscious of myself. I was extremely self-conscious every time I spent any moment in his presence. That does not mean that I was beating myself. I was aware of my presence in his presence. Whatever state I was in, I attributed to him. If I was in state of doubt, if I was in a state of belief, if I was state of fear, if I was in a state of guilt, if I was trying to hide an emotion or express an emotion, I attributed to his presence. Because if he wasn't there, I would not have to pay any attention to any of this. I wouldn't have to pay any attention. I would just go on living my life realizing what I want to realize, deceiving myself with whatever I wanted to deceive myself. I couldn't control his presence, except if I was not in his presence. I would place myself in his presence. I would go once a year, and he would come here once a year. Why? Because I wanted to see him and pal around? No. You become acutely aware your state. What is your state? STOP. If I could stop you right this second, and you could look at where you are, that is your state. When you go in front of the *shaykh*, that is what happens. But, in general, you take things for granted. Whether I was with him for six weeks or six days, it doesn't matter. It is the same thing, everyday—acutely aware of myself, my state. *Asalām aleikum*.