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Saturday

Title: [The Subtleties of Suhbet](#)

DVD title: Learning the Value of Suhbet
and Understanding Its Guidelines
Stories of Futuwwah

Allah Swt said, referring to Prophet Mohammed (sal), when the two were in the cave: **“Be not in sorrow, for surely Allah is with us.”**(9:40) When Allah Swt made Abu Bakr ni Sadiq a companion of Rasūlallah (sal), he made it very clear that Rasulallah (sal) allowed him to be his companion out of his compassion. He understood that in his company, even at that difficult time when they were hiding in a cave, that *suhbet*, that companionship would be transforming. Moreover, we begin to learn what the value of *suhbet* is.

Suhbet is a cornerstone of the Naqshbandī-Mujaddadī Tarīqah. There are certain guidelines to understand *suhbet*. For example, it is said that a noble person should show compassion to the one who accompanies him. That’s a very broad and encompassing concept. It could be accompanying you to Lynchburg, or on the *hijra* of Nebi Mohammed (sal). It was handed down in tradition finally coming to Malik, who said,

The Messenger of Allah (sal) said, “When do I meet my beloved friends?” His companions replied, “By our father and mother, aren’t we then your beloved friends?” Rasulallah (sal) answered, “You are my companions. My beloved friends, they are those who have trusted me without ever meeting me; therefore, any passion for them is greater.”

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What Rasālallah (sal) was telling is it that for those of us who are not of the Sahaba, and not of the Taba'ain, and not of the Taba-taba'ain (those who were in the company of the company of the people who met him), those who trust Rasulallah (sal) with that same trust and love are nearer to him than those who knew him. He is also telling us that there is another form of gathering, *suhbet*. It can be of three different kinds. You can have the companionship of someone who is above you in rank. That is called the companionship of *khidma*/service. Then you can have the companionship of someone who is below you, and it requires that the follower is treated with compassion and kindness; and the one who is followed is treated with respect and compliance. The third kind of companionship is the companionship of your equals, your peers. The requirement of that is you give preference to them over yourself. Among yourselves, you give preference to the other person. That encompasses spiritual chivalry, *futuwwah*.

When one accompanies the *murshid* or the *shaykh*, whose rank is equal to one's own (like when we were together with the *shuyukh* in Morocco), what is required and what is the underlying principle – and I want to give the benefit of the doubt because that is also one of the guidelines of *suhbet* – is that one has to abandon any opposition to those who are of equal rank, and interpret everything that comes from the other person in a positive vein. There was a story of the companion of Mansur bi Halaf al Maghribi, a famous saint. *A man asked him, "How many years have you accompanied Abu Uthman al Maghribi?" He looked at him and said, "I wasn't his companion. Rather, I served him for some period of time."* When you have someone of a lesser station as your companion, it is said that you will violate the rules of companionship were not able or willing to tell that person of some deficiency in their spiritual state.

So, you have the person or companion of equal rank who serves the other, and the person of higher rank who is respectful of the person of lower rank, but who is required to inform them of their spiritual deficiencies. Then you have the person of higher rank than yourself whom you serve. Then [again you have] the person of equal rank that you must defer to. So *suhbet* also has *adab*. There is a story that Abu Khair ul Tenati wrote to Jafar Mohammed Nisair. He said:

The burden of the ignorance of the poor rests on you alone, because you are too preoccupied with your own self to instruct them in good manners, thereby allowing them to persist in their ignorance. If, on the other hand, you are accompanying someone of an equal rank, then your approach is that of being blind toward their faults and interpreting, as far as possible, everything you see from them in a positive way. If you are unable to find anything favorable in interpretation, then blame and recriminate yourself.

If you can depend on these guidelines being the rule of behavior (*adab*) among the *murīds*, the *murshid*, and the *shuyukh*, you can pretty well guarantee that you will have a cooperative group of individuals. It's hard to guarantee that, but we should base our expectations upon that. Our expectation should be that these different ranks of people act in this way. This raises a very realistic question. (You know me; I'm going to be practical.) We have a very blessed situation where we can be among each other, and still we have to struggle with this.

You should take these guidelines, put them up on a wall, and read them every day. And you should strive to fulfill them. Those of you who have been in the path for 30 years, 25 years, 10 years or 5, or one year, or one month. It doesn't matter. You should strive to fulfill this, because you are always going to be with someone of a lesser rank. You will

always be with someone of a greater rank. You will always be with one of your peers. Then you have the companionship of your *shaykh*. When you lose any one of those relationships, you lose the ability to refine yourself. Practically speaking, that's all fine when you are thinking in terms of here (most of the time), and when you are thinking of people who are not only Muslims, but also of Tariqah. The rest of the time you are with people who are not Muslims and not of Tariqah. Or you are with people who are Muslims, but not of Tariqah. Or you are with Muslims who don't act like Muslims. What do you do? It's not just how you act; it's the opportunities you don't have.

You don't have the opportunities because it's not so easy to defer to a person – and I use this term in the broadest sense, not a narrow sense – who is not a *mu'min*. It's very difficult. Your expectations have to be different. There is no self-refinement. If you keep yourself at least part of the month, part of the week, part of the day in the company of people who are Muslims on the path, then you have the opportunity to refine your *adab*. Otherwise, as we know, we are going to act with good *adab* anyway, but it isn't *suhbet*. You are going to act toward a stranger well, or help a little old lady across the street, or treat your neighbor nicely, or treat your co-workers well and defer to them, because you are a Sufi on the path of Tasawwuf. That's all wonderful, but it is not *suhbet*. Because it is not *suhbet*, [though] it has benefit, you don't have the chance of getting the full development and refinement.

That's why we say the cornerstone of this path is to be in the companionship of good people. We mean people who are on the same path, basically. It's better to be in the company of good believers of some other religion than non-believers, unless the religion is against your religion. Then there are some stories that tell us other details.

Abul Ali Daqaq (ra) said he heard Hawaris (ra) say, "I told Abu Suleyman

Darrani that such and such a person is of little importance to me.” And he responded, “He is of little importance to me as well. However, we may be mistaken about our own status. We may not be from among the righteous, salihūn, and thus do not love them.”

It is reported that Ibrahim al Adham said when they were about to part ways, a man asked him, “If you have found any fault with me, let me know what it is.” And Ibrahim answered, “I have found no fault with you, because I have been looking at you with an eye of affection, and therefore have seen only good in you. Ask someone else about your faults.” It’s with this idea in mind that he recited this couplet: “The eye of contentment is blind to any fault, while the eye of spite reveals every error.”

Suhbet is not just to be in the company, but to act in a certain way in the company of people. Many of this stories reveal a lot about the attitude of *suhbet*.

I heard Abu Hatim say that he had heard Abu Nasir al Siraj say, that I had heard Zaaq say, “I have kept company with this folk for 40 years, and I have seen them always showing friendship toward one another or friendship toward those who love them. He who does not accompany his deeds by piety and scrupulousness eats nothing but what is totally illicit.”

Abu Mohammed said, “I want to be your companion.” He said, “If one of us dies, who will be the companion of the survivor?” The other man answered, “Allah.” He said, “Then let us accompany Allah now.”

A man accompanied another man for some time. Then one of them decided

to part ways with his companion, and asked him permission to leave. To this, the companion replied, “Only on the condition that your next companion is superior to us. If this is the case, then you should still not be his companion, since you chose us as your first companion.” The other man then said, “The desire to leave has disappeared from my heart.”

When you sit with these few guidelines I gave you at the beginning, and you act by these guidelines, your heart expands and reaches out to those people who are in that circle of companionship. In *suhbet*, whatever you hear, whatever you engage in, in conversation, will be uplifting to you. In other words, when you come and we sit together like this for *dars*, and its people have good *adab* toward one another, and the *suhbet* is very, very important and you try never to miss it, you don't know but you are hearing things and able to absorb things differently than if you are not people who relied on *suhbet*. You don't know that. It's like me saying, “Don't drive tomorrow because you might have an accident.” If you don't drive, you'll never know if you would have had an accident. But take my word for it. People who have a resonance, who are companions of one another – not just friendship – but who are companions and who have trust in one another, who share the common teaching and seeking, hear things differently.

In Islam, there is always the personal and the collective. There is the *sunnah* and the *fard*. There is *jamah* and individual prayer, always, right next to each other. You come to prayer, and you have your individual need and pray to Allah for your individual needs. But part of that prayer is done collectively, and part of it is done independently. Yet even the independent prayer in the *masjid* is done in the company of others. That's the *suhbet*. This is a metaphor. It's a sign/*alam*, a symbol of something that brings harmony and peace.

Abdun Nasr al Siraj said that he had heard Khatami said, "A certain man used to be my companion. However, my heart disagreed with him. I gave him a present in order to remove the dislike from my heart." (Have you ever done that?) However, that disagreement remained there. So I took the man to my house and I said to him, "Place your foot on my cheek." He refused, and I told him that he must do this. I made a vow that he should not remove his foot from my cheek until Allah removed this dislike from my heart. When this feeling was removed, I told him, "Now you can remove your foot."

Ibrahim al Adham used to earn his living as a seasonal harvester. (We call them migrant workers. He was a shaykh living as a migrant worker.) As an orchard watchman, he would spend everything he earned on his companions. He kept company with a group of his companions, working during the day, and spending the money he earned on them at night. They used to get together at night, having fasted during the day, and he was usually late from his work. They said, "Let's break our fast without him. Perhaps he will be joining us sooner because of that." (In other words, they wanted to punish him.) So they broke their fast and fell asleep.

When Ibrahim returned, he found them fast asleep and said, "Poor things." Remember, they were trying to punish him, and he's providing everything for them. "Poor people, perhaps they had nothing to eat." He took some flour and kneaded it, and lit a fire and threw some ashes on the bread dough. When they woke up, they found him blowing on the fire, lying flat on the ground with his beard and moustache pressed against the floor. They asked him what was he doing. He answered, "I thought you had no food to break your fast and had fallen asleep, and I wanted to wake you up

only when the dough was ready to be baked.” So they had fresh bread. They said to each other, “Look at what we have done, and how he treats us after that.”

This is normally called *adab*, but it only occurs in the condition of *suhbet*. Try to make the distinction between the two.

He used to lay down three conditions before he would take someone as a companion. That it would be him who served that companion. That he would utter the call to prayer himself, and that he would receive the same portion of any worldly sustenance Allah might provide. One day, one of his companions said to him, “What if I’m not capable of this?” Ibrahim answered, “I like your honesty.”

[Husain] asked Dhul Nun, “Who should I keep company with?” He answered, “Anyone from whom you do not hide anything that Allah Most High knows about you.”

I told you the story that when we were in Marrakesh. We were doing some shopping in the city, and we went into this place where they sell perfume. Things have changed; now you get a massage while you are there. We tried all the different oils. A young man met us at the door and took us inside. As soon as I saw him, I knew he was not a good person. I had things in my mind that I wanted to buy and bring back, but I turned around and walked out of the store, because he was evil. There was no question. He wasn’t just a pain-in-the-arm salesman, he was evil. Abu Hawaris said, *“When you keep company with evil folk, you begin to think evil, even the ones of the Elect.”* Al Junayd recounted, saying,

When Abu Hafs arrived in Baghdad, he had with him a bald man who never uttered a word. I asked the other companions of Abu Hafs about it, and they said, “This man spent 100,000 dirhams on Abu Hafs, and then borrowed another 100,000 dirham to spend on him; yet Abu Hafs will not permit him to utter a single word.”

Dhul Nun said, “Do not keep company with Allah unless you obey Him. Do not keep company with His creatures unless you dispense advice to them, and do not keep company with your lower self unless you oppose it. Do not keep company with the devil unless you show enmity toward him.”

Someone said to him, “Whom should I keep company with?” He said, “With someone who will pay visits to you when you fall ill, and someone who will repent on your behalf when you sin.”

This is all *suhbet*. Alhamdulillah, we know these are the kind of people you are also. When someone is ill, look how you take care of them. That also is *suhbet*, but it comes from *suhbet*. We need to understand that. There is no question you can exist without it. But the saying is, a tree will grow by itself, but a tree growing with no care will not bear good fruit, if any. In the same way, a *murīd* who has no one to study with – the potential good won’t come out of the *murīd*. How you come to a gathering, even to a friend’s home, is very important. In different cultures, these deeply spiritual principles have become social and cultural principles. You would never think of going to a home in Iran or Morocco without bringing a gift. You have to bring something; some fruit, some flowers, some dish. If someone gives you a dish of food they made, that dish has to be returned with food in it.

The spiritual equivalent to that is the *adab* of how you come to the *shaykh*. You've heard me tell the story of how Hazrat (ra) never spoke or sat down in front of Mohammed Sayed Khan (ra), my *grandshaykh*, until he was asked or told to. Some weekends he would travel all the way from Delhi into U.P, only to stand outside the door for most of the weekend, because the *shaykh* was busy doing something.

Abul Qasim al Qureyshi said, "As a beginning I would never enter into the presence of my master Abu Ali unless I was fasting. I would also perform full ablution/ghusl. How many times did I come to the door of his school, only to turn back out of my lack of resolve to enter his house? When I overcame my timidity, and I entered his school, I would be overcome by a sense of numbness in the middle of it, to such an extent that one could stick a needle in me without me taking notice of it. When I had an issue to discuss, I had no need to move my tongue to ask him about it; for no sooner had I found myself in his presence, he would start to explain it to me. Many a time I witnessed this phenomenon, and sometimes I would think to myself, "If Allah would send a messenger to His creatures during my lifetime, could I possibly have for him the same respect that I have for Abu Ali (may Allah have mercy on him)?" I couldn't imagine that it would be possible. Throughout my attendance at his teaching sessions, and being in his presence, a bond was formed between us. Not for a single moment until his death did the thought of disputing his opinion ever cross my mind.

These are good stories, and we can leave here saying, "I want to be just like that." But how you get to be like that is how you act with one another, how you act with people who are Muslims, who are believers, who are on Tariqah, who are in your circle, who are in your family and friends. This is why you have very high context communications in

different cultures, or families, or with one another. When you bring someone from the outside in to that, that person has to make a big effort, just like you had to make a big effort to become Muslims. You can be a Muslim by name, but at some point, you had to become a Muslim by form. At some point, you had to become a Muslim by some knowledge, as well as form. And at some point, after you have some knowledge, you have to be responsible for that knowledge and become a Muslim by experience. Then add to that Tariqah. You are a Sufi by name, and then by form. You do *la illaha illa 'lah, dhikr* like we did tonight. Anyone can join the *dhikr*, but then you must be a Sufi by meaning. How do you do that? You have to be in the company of Sufis. That's how you do it.

It doesn't seem to be very important, but it's not just to have these wonderful stories. Now it gets even deeper. Again, [one of the *shuyukh*] says,

Be alert and seek companions for yourself. Rid yourself of any companion who does not rejoice in obeying you, and never keep company with him. For he will make your heart harden and he will become your adversary. Multiply your thoughts of me, and you will deserve my gratefulness and abundance of my grace.

What does “rejoice in obeying” mean? You should contemplate that. The whole concept of obedience to a Westerner is anathematic. You know that, right? You are all mostly Westerners. It's anathema. You don't like it. The word “obey” is a bad, bad word. Even when it comes to the speed limit, we don't like to obey. I calculate and go 10% over [the speed limit]. If it's 55mph, you can go 60.5mph. We don't like to obey. What does it mean to obey—let alone rejoice in obeying? Can you imagine what state your ego would have to be in to rejoice in obeying someone?

This is a lesson we have to teach our children also. To obey is not a weakness. To obey is liberating. When you realize that the person who is your companion really truly has your well being and heart in mind, and therefore wants to be in your company to assist you—or wants to be in the company of someone above their rank in order to serve them, or wants to be in the company of someone equal to them in order to defer to them—then if someone is suggested, you rejoice in the opportunity to follow that suggestion and to obey it. You know you are in the protective custody of someone who cares and loves you. That would be a great thing if, all of us when we are children, could realize that when we are children. There is so much safety and security in that. That's why people take a rigid approach to Islam where they try to find every rule and every regulation and obey it, because naturally inside of us we really do want to have this obedience and surrender. We really want it because we know that in it, that's when we were the freest.

When we were in the wombs of our mothers, that's when we were the freest: zero gravity. We were free of gravity, floating around in zero gravity. Fantastic! Totally obedient. Do you want to eat something that gives you heartburn? I'll share it with you. If the mother eats something that makes her sick, the baby has to suffer with the host being sick. This also is *suhbet*. It is so incredibly important. Then, when you are sitting in *muraqabah* with people who have a common bond, or doing the same practices, or making *dhikr* with them, even if you don't feel the Divine presence, you certainly feel the presence of everybody else in the room, don't you? You feel very much a part of something. This is why these little stories tell us a lot about why *suhbet*, if you want to contemplate it, is a cornerstone of our teaching. A little esoteric tonight, but I've been terribly practical for days. I will take one question.

QUESTION: On Thursday night you said you weren't sure how many people in the room

were Muslims. My question from that is: how do I know I am a Muslim?

Shaykh: The level I was speaking about was not just saying the *shahadah*. Have you said that? (Yes.) So you're a Muslim. I was talking about a quality. I was talking about a Muslim who really, really is seeking to understand the foundations and core of '*aqīda* and *akhlaq*. How do you know? You know because a) you feel unworthy. b) You try to always do better. c) You question your own motives over and over again and see where you *nafs* is. d) You struggle with that *nafs*, even with the feeling that you'll never overcome it. e) And in addition, you make *muhāsabat* on a regular basis, and do the practices you are given without resistance. That is the kind of Muslim I mean. I can't question whether a person is a Muslim or not if they say the *shahadah*. That's one part of it.

I'll tell you a story. Someone I know traveled back from Morocco with a lady, Taslim. She is a Muslim. She was saying that not all of those followers are Muslims, and it has begun to upset her a lot. So she's distancing herself from the people she's been around for 30 some years. She said, "Even the ones who claim they are Muslims really harbor negative feelings toward Islam. So they don't give themselves fully to it." She is trying to remove herself from those people. The question I was putting out was, ask yourself whether you are following form, and if you are harboring negativity toward that which you are ostensibly embracing. Have you given yourself the opportunity to really understand what it is? Look at the rest of what I said on Thursday night and what it offers, what it really is. Are you going to let yourself be blocked, even though you are doing the form and using the name, even though you may be learning Arabic [for example]? Where does your resistance lie? Your resistance becomes obvious when there is no *suhbet*, when the *adab* isn't correct. When a dish comes to you and you don't return it with food, I can't say you are not a Muslim. But I can say you are not a Sufi. Do you

understand? What kind of a Muslim are you, what kind of a Sufi?

When you really look at that deeply, you should be saying, what kind of a human being are you? But what makes you the kind of human being who understand these things is you have to follow a way. You have to have guidance. You have to have models. You have to have a path. You have to have support. You have to know who your friends and companions really are. It's your companions who will sit with you when you are sick, and not for five minutes. "Oh, how are you, I just stopped by. I have to go now." It's someone who will sit there and watch the drip going down, and make sure they are giving you the right medicine and looking after your well-being. That's when the dish comes back just as a dish. Something should be in it: one apple, something. And it has to come from you. So I ask you: Are you a Muslim? What kind of a Muslim are you? What kind of a Sufi are you?

Muslims are a dime a dozen, just like Christians and Jews. You can buy them on the street corner. "I'd like to have three Muslims, please." "That'll be 20 dirham." but what kind of a Muslim? Are you an Armani Muslim or a Walmart Muslim? That's what I'm referring to. The fact that you asked yourself that question and it bothers you, that's good.

What about Sha'bān?

QUESTION: I was doing a fast last Wednesday, and in my innocence I thought the day would be wide open and I could easily fast.

Shaykh: That was your first mistake. You were negotiating your fast. You can't negotiate your fast. You have to fast no matter what.

Student: It was hard to decide to fast, so I picked a day which I thought was easy, but it didn't turn out so great.

Shaykh: Monday and Thursdays are good days to fast.

I wondered what I would do about [our community] dinner, because dinner [on Wednesday] comes before Maghrib. I contemplated that if I was rigid and just stayed home and broke fast later that wouldn't be good. So I thought I would fast until dinner. Does that count?

Shaykh: No. It counts as practice.... Allah will judge your intention.

Student: Is it flexible in a certain way?

Shaykh: No, but it's practice.

Student: I felt a lot of benefit.

Shaykh: Of course. It doesn't count as a fast, but there is benefit in it. What was your *niyyat*? If you make a *niyyat* to do a good action and you do it, then that's counted. If you make a *niyyat* to do a good action, but you don't fulfill that action, then it's counted also. If you make a *niyyat* to do a bad action, and you don't do the bad action, it's counted as a good action. If you make a *niyyat* to do a bad action, and you do it, then it's counted as bad. The only time it is counted as bad is under one circumstance.

But you can't say that it is a fast. You can say, "I attempted to fast," or "I practiced fasting," but you can't say it's a fast. That's good. It's a good preparation. Why not?

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Cut back by one meal a day to get used to it, whatever you want to do. What you did was good, but you can't "count it" as a fast. Why would you want to "count it" as a fast anyway? Allah counted it as a fast.