

August 22, 2009

Saturday

Title: [Ramadān: A Time of Spiritual Innovation](#)

DVD title: Ramadan: An Opportunity to Build and Strengthen our Spiritual Infrastructure

Dinner blessing: O Allah, we are here at our first *iftār* in gratitude to You for the opportunity to spend the month establishing the habit remembering You for the rest of the year. We spend time at night turning our attention toward You and remembering the gifts we have. During the day time during Ramadān, during our work, remembering You is the challenge. We ask You, Allah Swt, to give us the Eid, to bring us showers of Your Hikma, to bring lessons You have in store for us, and to keep the angels near us in the *malakut*. We ask You, Allah Swt, to give safety to those who travel distances to come here to be with family, who appreciate the community and the family, and understand that the history of the community is being built by each one of us. The future is in the hands of each one of us. You brought these beautiful babies and young children into the community, and we ask You for more of the same: good Muslims, good Sufis, people who will change the world, and not have to *insh'allah* struggle to understand their heritage and the meaning of their lives. It is our responsibility to teach them that and help them understand. *Amin*.

Sohbet: *Bismillah ir Rahman ir Raheem*. Yesterday I was telling you about this history lesson. “Allah Swt does not take away knowledge by snatching it from the people, but by taking away the scholars. When He leaves no learned person, people appoint ignorant people as their leaders. Then they are asked to deliver verdicts and advice, and they

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deliver them without knowledge, and they lead others astray.” That pretty well describes the world we live in. I think I said to you that we are very blessed to be where we are, even at the time in history we are living, especially because we are living at a time in history when it is very, very difficult for people who think and who care about other people. We see the world and this country becoming more and more fascist, and more and more extreme. We should understand very clearly that this is a reflection of the mentality of the people, of something that is happening on a much more global and cosmic level. We can’t point a finger and say, this is the result of environmental degradation and destruction, or this is the result of genocide. They are the result of a mentality of ignorance.

For many generations, there have been ignorant people leading ignorant people. In that sense, we say that people are “dumbed down” and kept ignorant. They are often led by a combination of many elements, like poverty and power struggles. But it always involves the *nafs* of some individuals. This ignorance of leaders who are leading people astray periodically in the history of humankind peaks. Then you have these pressure valves that go off. We could say that global warming or genocide is a pressure value. But you see it is taking more and more and more to make people be awake. We had this hope that the last election in the US was going to be a sign of people waking up. We’re not sure now, because, unfortunately, we are starting to see culpability on the part of the leadership in this country to be, as Shaykh Noorrudeen was saying, “supping with the devil.”

The struggles we have, and the decisions we have to make in our personal and private lives, to the degree they are based on our emotions and selfishness, to the degree they are based on fear and greed... A person can be fearful, but not greedy; they can be generous and fearful. You don’t have to have all the symptoms under a remedy to know that you

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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should be using it. You only have to have a dominant symptom and a pattern. You can be a wonderful, brilliant individual, intelligent in your work, capable in your social service, but at the same time you can be fearful. That fear, that lack of trust in Allah, leads us to make decisions that perhaps in the moment seem to be good and right. But when you see that you are fitting into a pattern at least of entropy (and at the most destructive), where your own mentality is contributing to the degradation of human society (and that's only in the outer), you have to ask yourself, what is happening inwardly? What am I abandoning inwardly that allows me to be so influenced by my greed, desires, fear, anger, self-doubt, or whatever it may be? We should ask that question before we forget how to ask that question. For sure, we forget how to ask that question. If we are still at the point where we can still ask ourselves that question, then if anybody else asks us that question, we think about it. But at the point where we forget, someone will ask us that question; and we will have all kinds of reasons and excuses to sell out our spiritual reality, our spiritual gift, the purpose for which we were created. It happens, and you know it happens.

For expediency, we may make certain decisions, or avoid certain circumstances because they are uncomfortable, confrontational or whatever. Ultimately, we are adding to the degradation of the spiritual environment, and more probably to the lowering of the standards of human nature and human society. We are abandoning our culture, abandoning our foundation upon which we make decisions, and upon which we serve Allah Swt and humanity. Allah Swt gives us this opportunity called Ramadān every year, where we should establish good habits. In doing that, we should at least be able to contravene some of those issues, and keep our consciousness at a level where our integrity is not lost. Nobody wants to consciously sell their soul to the devil. The devil never comes dressed like Shaytan. Shaytan comes in the form of beautiful sweets and green vegetables, and our desires and our fears. It tells us, this will take the fear away.

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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But Shaytan never takes the fear away; it covers it with something so it can grow more and more and more.

We really are blessed where we are with a common bond and belief, one that is created consciously for the benefit not just of our community and our families, but for the future. I think I can say that honestly and sincerely, because we have spent thirty years in our direct work, and many more years personally in different areas of work and life, building this infrastructure. You see how much work goes into every weekend to try to maintain this community on a physical level. Ask yourself, if everything is connected, and the inner and outer are connected, how much does it take to maintain the inner infrastructure of this community? And what does it mean, that this community is that important? It is, but it is symbolic of the human community, the Muslim community. We can't make our life a "lake of milk story" and think, "Well, everybody else will take care of the Muslim part of it, or this other part. Nobody will notice if I don't pour my liter of milk into the lake. Who will notice?" For sure, everyone will notice.

They may not know that it was you who didn't pour it in; but you are adding to the degradation of human society. If you don't believe that, you do not believe the Qur'an. If you don't believe it, you haven't read the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Injil, let alone the commentaries, the *tafsir*, the exegesis. Yet we get into states of mind where we think we are the exception. "This circumstance is an exception. I'm an exception. Who will notice?" It's noticed, just like you would notice, eventually, if there were no frogs anymore. There would be a lot more bugs, and there wouldn't be the pleasant sounds of the frogs. When we moved here on this property, you hardly heard a bird. We don't know exactly why. I suspect it was because they were growing tobacco all around us and spraying the fields, but slowly the birds came back. Now, and for the last 20 years, in the

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morning and evenings, you can hear the birds all the time. It's like that.

I would go so far as to say that sometimes we make choices that we don't know about, all of us, which put us in the category of people who hunt the whales and kill the dolphins. But we don't think that's what we are doing, because we are just doing our personal work, just like those fishermen are doing. We are not Eskimos, so we don't need to hunt the whales. We can mentally and intellectually avoid understanding how everything is connected, right down to this dinner, to our personal fast, to this community, to the Muslim community, and to what the Muslim community should be contributing and can contribute to the world community. Yet, you see what is happening by so-called Muslims in Iran or other places in the world—Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan. We are not going to deal with that because they are not Muslims. They are not, but we are—and we are believers.

If I asked you, what would you say your beliefs are worth? You'd say, "I wouldn't sell them for anything." But then go through the process. Here's a thousand dollars. Would you sell it for a thousand dollars? Or here's an offer for a job at the best University in the world at \$110,000 a year. Would you sell it for that? No? How about a million? How do you sell belief? You don't gather up all your belief and say, "Here it is. Give me the million dollars." You do things that undermine your belief. You do things that make your beliefs fifth, sixth, in your mind. You do things that don't perpetuate the true Islam, the true values, the true community/*jamat*, the true understanding of yourself. You give those up. You never see it, because it's like trying to watch a flower open in the spring. One minute you look, it's closed. The next minute, it's open. But if you stare at it, you never see it open because your brain doesn't operate like that. You have to look through another lens to see it open.

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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Allah Swt gave us these other lenses to see with, and if you don't use them, you don't see. It has nothing to do with your intellectual capabilities, unless what you are selling along with it are your intellectual capabilities. Then you become like the crazy people who think Barack Obama was born in Kenya somewhere. You become an anti-intellectual, a fascist. Allah Swt (and I don't want to say "in his infinite wisdom") created this system where there is potential balance, and gave us a consciousness in which to resonate with that balance. In so doing, Allah Swt assigned a month for us to be honest, to reflect upon ourselves, and to maintain and strengthen our spiritual infrastructure. *Mañana* is too late. That's why Allah Swt says we have the inner and the outer part of the fast. We have to. As you get older, you can't fast. If you get sick, you can't fast. Does it mean you get no benefit from the month of *Ramadān*? Of course not. There is an inner part of this fast; the most important part. The outer part is only to put you in a state of mind to do the inner. If you have the capability yourself to do it without it, fine, you can negotiate with Allah Swt. You won't be the first. Remember my story the other day about 25 prayers. It's a time for us to strengthen our infrastructure so that the nation of "I" becomes stronger. Each one of us is a state, like in the United States.

The point becomes, how do we preserve what we have in our infrastructure? How do we recapture the essence of that inner culture that protects us and creates resonance and balance and real happiness in our lives, not temporary happiness; and in the lives of people around us without selling out? We are given one thing to sell: ourselves. *Bai'at* means to sell. We sell ourselves into a process; not into slavery, but into servitude; not to a person, not to a *shaykh*, but through a person, through the Prophet Mohammed (sal) directly to Allah. That is the path that was created for us. It was told to us and proven to us, and it works. Of course, we want to think that "maybe I can do something better. I can improve upon it."

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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How much would you sell your spiritual life for, your beliefs for? For a million, two million, five million dollars, for name, for fame—for what will you sell it for? It's impossible to have success or strive without hard work and hard decisions, without struggle. It can't happen. You have the *madad* of the *shaykh* and of Rasulallah (sal), and of Allah Swt, the *madad* of the *ambiyā*. You also have to have the *madad* of hard work, the *maiyyat* of hard work. Life has to have the *maiyyati amal*, the accompaniment of work—only difficult work, hard work, real effort, real strain and stress; otherwise, there will be no success. Remember the old saying: effort is progress. We can't accept this idea of complacency. It may be easier not to confront certain things, not to initiate things, not to respond at times to things that deserve a response (some things don't). But we can't be complacent and live with ease, and think we deserve something to go easier in our life. That's anathema to success. You can't say "Ya Fallah" and be complacent.

We can't be, therefore, people who resent work, effort, fear failure, or expect to thrive without real effort. It's not black and white. You can work yourself silly at your job, and not work at all in your relationships with people. You know that. Because fear is like water: it takes the route of least resistance. If you have no fear about your work, but you are able to articulate something, or if you have a relationship with someone or with life itself, that's where the fear will come. We know we have to learn from our errors and successes, and avoid the traps that caught us in the past, and not waste time, and redouble our efforts, because it is precious time. You just don't know how precious it is until the commodity becomes rare, like at my age the commodity of time gets to be rare. So you understand how precious it is. In the age of these [young] people, it is not so precious, until one day it is too late.

When do we begin this process of awareness? Yesterday. So Allah Swt gives us a month to rebuild our infrastructure. He puts billions of dollars (equivalent effort) into that and says, “I’m investing in you. Will you accept this? I’m going to subsidize the restructuring of your bank, but you have to give out loans.” Do you see the pattern? You can invest in what’s right, or in what’s wrong. The government is under a lot of criticism for investing in Wall Street and the banking industry; and rightfully so in many instances. Should it be wrong that Allah Swt invests in you or me? If someone comes to you and says, “I’m going to pay for your Master’s degree,” will you feel some responsibility, some duty to do well, or just the fear of losing the subsidy? Whatever it is, you will try to do well. As we enter Ramadān, we have to remember that our balance, prayers, and *du’ā* with hard work and effort is our response. That’s what we have to do. Those are the classes we attend, and the responsibility we have.

It is not just to put your head down on the ground, stand up, and recite this and recite that. This is to rebuild the infrastructure of your spiritual life. You have to track that back. Where did that begin? “When I was a child.” Where? “Here in the community, or in my parent’s home.” What were those values? Where did they come from? Where did they get them? This is your *silsila*, your family, *shejra*. You look at that and say, “Aha.” There is a resonance, a rhythm to that, an eternity to that. When Aneesa plays a *maqam* on the *qanun*, there is an improvisational part of it. But she is improvising on the basis of the *maqam* or *dastagh*. If she goes outside of it, then she loses the integrity of the piece. If you go outside of things, you lose the integrity. You lose the nobility. Allah is telling you, you are Muslims. It’s more than praying, more than fasting, more than just staying up late and praying Taraweeh prayer. It’s affirming your infrastructure.

Of course, things change generation to generation, but there are certain things that don’t

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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change. If I'm going to repair a bridge in 1920 that was built in 1880, I'm going to have certain tools to do that. If I'm repairing that same bridge in 2010, I'm going to have different tools, environmentally green tools, things that will last longer. I'm going to have better procedures and equipment to do it, but it's still repairing that bridge, and that bridge is going from here to there for a purpose. Sometimes it's a cultural purpose, like the bridge at Mostar, symbolically linking the Serb, Croatian, and Muslim community. Did it make peace? No. But it symbolized peace. We have to make peace with ourselves, too. We have to have the ability to know who, and what we are, and why we are. This is about Ramadān.

Why is it *fi sabīlillah* that we do it? This is Allah's plan, the creation, the system we are part of. What is the *amanat*? We are the ones who tune the *qanun* and play it. The design came into the head of someone because of creativity. Creativity comes from Allah Swt. So Allah Swt works through your hands to create the instruments. Allah worked through someone who figured out how to make strings out of the gut of an animal, and then out of wire. Allah Swt is working through your hands. He says, "Take that instrument, play it over there, and make people at peace with it." Then he's walking through your feet. "And sing this praise of Me." Then he's speaking through your lips. Who is the He? The He is resonance and balance and harmony. Don't do things that create disharmony. That's why in Ramadān, we try to do things that create harmony and resonance. We try to watch what our tongue says, so we are not like the women who were vomiting up flesh and blood. The Prophet (sal) said, "You are doing that because you are backbiting during your fast." You are eating. It's a metaphor, maybe. It doesn't matter. It's a metaphor now.

As we come into this month, we have to remember our balance, prayers and *du'ā*. We

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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have to take the inspiration and energy of this dynamic reality Allah Swt has placed us in, and the responsibility we have, and create milestones of spiritual progress for ourselves every day. We have to strengthen the infrastructure with the modern tools that we have, our intellect, our understanding of human psychology and social psychology, and the state of humanity, our understanding of Islam and Arabic, our understanding of the limitations of culture and the greatness of culture, our understanding of our word, our bond, our truth, our nobility, all of that, and make spiritual progress every day, every hour. This is what happens during Ramadān. It can be our attitude, our *niyyat* towards someone else that is a milestone or a checkpoint. Life will present us with opportunities to see where we are against the backdrop I am painting for you today.

To be able to use the skills we have developed, not just in our work but in our discussion, our meditation, our interactions with other human beings and in our discussion with ourselves, these milestones must have some materiality with them. They must have a deeply spiritual component to them for there to be success. The material component is the touchstone, the template. The spiritual component is our practice, faith, trust, submission, obedience, and our clarity about our own existence, our own history. When those two things are put together, you draw a beautiful picture.

The corrections we seek during this month of Ramadān in our own circumstances are also the ones we need to correct in our own behavior. If you see difficulty in your circumstance, then look to your behavior. Yes, Jesus said, “Change me O Lord, not my circumstance.” If you see difficulty in what’s facing you in the physical world, look to your own attitude and your own behavior. How will you do that if you don’t have the time? Allah Swt has given us the time during Ramadān. “But I still have to get up and go to work; and on top of it, I have to fast!” It’s a good opportunity to trust in Allah Swt. If
Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid www.circlegroup.org

you can't fast, you can fast in another way—internally. Take the time. There's always time. You know it and I know it. Try to remember that whatever you are trying to correct, it is exactly what you are trying to correct in yourself.

It's late and I don't want to go on now. I will continue with this as I have been, but I want to make one more point. We live in a time of social innovation. This month is about spiritual innovation, *bida hasana*/beautiful innovation. We also talk in our work about collaboration and consultative practice. You don't do it alone. The strength lies in collaboration. You aggregate your knowledge and collaborate and consult, and you get better results. Allah Swt, the Prophet (sal), the *shaykh* and the *shuyukh* are your collaborators and consultants. On top of that, there is your sense of what is true, and your understanding of where you are, who you are, what you are, and where you come from. It is your knowledge of Qur'an, Hadith, and your history—I don't mean just your cultural history, but that, too—your spiritual history. Especially during this month we have the opportunity to practice a constructive, consultative, collaborative, spiritually innovative pattern of behavior. If we are careful with whom we associate, and watch our interactions with others carefully, no matter what anybody else who doesn't understand thinks—but you always care what those who understand think, what the *shuyukh* think, what Rasulallah (sal) said—especially our day to day interactions with ordinary people who don't have belief, or whose belief is significantly different; if we allow ourselves to taste the results of our own attitudes and actions, and we watch ourselves, even if it is bitter at times; as well as restraining the tendencies we have to blame, or find fault, or make excuses that make us mindless and forget our way, and make us dependent only on our emotions and desires, then we will have begun to purify ourselves and solve whatever it is we have to solve. That means we have to really practice perseverance and patience, which is at the least, difficult.

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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We have to practice love, and love to be among those who believe and who share our path and faith, and actively pursue that gratitude, and actively pursue one another. We must really practice patience and perseverance, because it's a time to learn the value of completing our task, inward and outward. It is a time for restructuring, rebuilding, and renovating, a time of restraint, of overcoming the tendency to blame others. During this time, we can solidify our foundations, correct our actions, find and experience the peace and comfort one feels when one comes to the truth, embraces the truth, accepts that truth, even if it is difficult, and [we can] realize that the truth really does make you free. It's a time for building self-respect and humility. Abu Uthman (ra) said, "*Whoever has self-respect shows respect for others. Whoever does not have self-respect, has no respect for others.*" *Insh'allah*, the next time we will talk a little about the value of abasement. *Asalaamu aleikum.*