

October 29, 2009

Thursday



Title: Majāz: The Metaphor of Life

DVD title: Majāz/Metaphor:
A Passageway beyond Words into another Language

I really want to talk about *majāz*, but it's very, very complicated, very deep. Every time I think of talking about it, it's so deep that I think I'll put you to sleep. Just, let me satisfy myself to some degree. I'll give you a couple of things to think about, and then I'll talk about it some other time. I think that's the only way to do this. Then I'll go on and speak about what I spoke about last night.

[I am] setting aside some internal controversies among different *madab* on this subject, because they are really foolish differences. [They are foolish because] it would be like if I said to you, cut out all analogies from your conversation. Some people say if you use a metaphor, it's like telling a lie because you are not telling the truth. You are not speaking of the actual thing, but something else. One sect of Shafī and one sect of Malikī believe this. So [I am] setting this aside.

Like any metaphor, a metaphor is reflective of some reality. The subjects of *haqiqah* and *majāz* come together. We are describing something metaphorically, and something that exists. It has a reality, and that's it. The other thing is there is a semantic aspect. Words are used to describe something else, in another way. If we would take those metaphors away from the Qur'an, it would be taking the life out of the Qur'an. If you would read

the Qur'an for those metaphors, you would see.

Again, I want to set that aside. I want to establish for future discussions that this is very important, and tell you why on a whole other level. That level is maybe easy to describe and maybe difficult to describe, setting aside the semantic and linguistic manipulations that go on within the metaphor. For example, if you say “the red man,” you may refer to an Indian. If you say, “the reddish man,” you may be referring to someone who is angry, and you are describing metaphorically their state. Also [one must] understand linguistically that the metaphor may be dominated by cultural conventions or colloquial means of expression. Certain metaphors will mean something to one person and something different to someone else; yet, there is something specific in that: *al-wadh* (linguistic coinage). There is a specific way in which things are said linguistically through Arabic, and other languages like Farsi. That way is called *taiyyin*. It means an expression that is, in and of itself, complete. These are the external aspects of the use of metaphor.

The truth or the actuality is a template for something else. If you said, “I actualized something,” it means you made it happen. You established it. This is *fa'il* – the doer of the action. Or it is of the *fa'il*, but it's when something actualized or established itself on its own. That's the technical stuff. But what is important for the Sufi, for the knower, is this whole concept of metaphor is active, dynamic. It is *jazza*. *Jazza* means the place you are traveling through. You can say, “I made something *majāz* toward my desire. I made some inroads toward fulfilling this desire.” It's dynamic. “I made some *majāz*. I want to accomplish something, and I made some inroads into accomplishing that.” You can use the word that way. Now we are calling it a metaphor, but it also has an actuality to it. That's very important, because if it doesn't have actuality, it's not real. It doesn't fulfill

its purpose. That's how deep these people were thinking.

We all take metaphors for granted, but it has to have some reality to it. In that sense, you can have some inroads into understanding something that just the *fa'il* of it won't necessarily tell you in a way you can grasp and understand it. That's how you get the idea that *al-majāz* is a corridor toward the formation of some deeper concept. This is the semantics and linguistics behind the Qur'an. Think that Allah is revealing this. He is not just revealing words, but is revealing things metaphorically, because it is the means to understand them. It is the *wasīla* itself. Then think of it this way: that the Prophet (sal) is a *wasīla*, a means. That's why I like to speak of the Prophet as being like a metaphor for the truth. It's not just black and white. There's the light and there's the dark. It's all very dynamic, very living. This is the al-Hayyu al-Qayyum. It's Ever-Living, Ever-Present, Ever-Expressing Truth.

Where does this come from? Prophet Mohammed (sal) was commanded by Allah. Where does command come from? '*Ālam al-amr*. He is commanded by Allah to speak to people in accordance with their ability to understand, and to the measure of their intellect. For that reason, there needed to be a linguistic creation to transmit that spirituality, not just [to transmit] words or a message, but to transmit that spirituality in some form (in small little doses or large doses) up to the ability of the listener to receive them. If you go with a glass this big, you get this much. If you go with a bigger cup, you get that much.

There is another, deeper meaning. By creating these metaphors, it created the force or power to map into another language what is being revealed. You have the truth/*haqiqah*,

and now it's in a metaphorical sense passing through this corridor, this passageway, going beyond just what those words mean, into another language. "You mean, rather than Arabic, another language? No, I mean into the language of metaphor. It is also perhaps a non-spoken spiritual language. You hear it, just like you hear a poem. You hear words. They are images of reality. But in some way, it is a non-spoken, spiritual experience that is taking place. It uplifts you. It deepens your knowledge or experience because it has passed through this process. It has been transformed. It's the same truth, but the way it is being spoken empowers it to have a spiritual effect on you, *tajallī*. It enhances, but not only that.

What else does a metaphor do in poetry? It compresses the truth. Instead of describing something in prose terms, you compress it. This is what I call Sufi-zip, or you can call it Qur'an-zip. You are compressing it. By compressing it, the Prophet (sal), speaking this way, is able to speak a lot more with a lot less. You already have the Qur'an that is compressed in the revelation. It's not like a prose book. You can't read it from cover to cover and get a story. The chapters don't make sense in any kind of linear way. We know it is a compressed message. When it passes through this passageway, internally, it now expands inside of you.

Because of that, this form supports the traversing from the *dhāhir* to the *bātin*. In the *dhāhir*, things are very actualized. In the *bātin*, things are compressed and condensed. Or you can say, in the *dhāhir* you can have piecemeal things, and in the *bātin* things get expanded to its ultimate. You can look either way at it. In the *bātin*, everything is infinite. So every little thing becomes infinite. But it doesn't matter; the metaphor on metaphor holds. The *dhāhir* is the emergent abstraction. The *bātin* is the innermost

concealed essence or core. Basically, this is what Prophet Mohammed (sal) said. When you are studying chaos theory, you talk about emergent phenomena. Emerging from where? From the *bātin*, from the concealed hidden core (the *khafī* and the *akhfah*) comes this emergent phenomena, but it is the emergent abstraction that now becomes described.

This is what transpires in *muraqabah*, meditation, as you travel back through this corridor, this canal, this isthmus. Your ship is traveling through the Panama Canal. Also, there are spiritual realities or concepts that are inaccessible but for the interface of *majāz*. Without metaphor, those spiritual realities won't be revealed. How can I give you an example of that? Every one of us has seen a film where they are breaking into a museum to steal some valuable piece of art. They have lasers. What do they do? They throw a can of stuff that's like smoke, and then they can see the lasers; they then jump and flip over it. The laser beam isn't seen until something reveals it.

There are certain concepts and realities that can only be seen vis a vis *majāz*. Some of these entities may not even be of this world. Or they are of this world, but can't be seen in this world. On the physical or pseudo physical level, you'd say like the *jinn* or the angels. Because of that, there is a need for some other kind of an interface with these spiritual entities to allow us to see what's there from here. That interface is that dynamic process, the *majāz*. Then, over time, human beings change. We go through an evolution of science and technology; there are changes in cultural orientations, and the mentality of people change, even the language of people change. There are languages that were spoken a thousand years ago that are not spoken today. So too, spiritual language requires a sort of co-variant linguistic structure that assigns a kind of meaning or semantic to the spiritual text (the Qur'an) that would allow it to adjust as humanity adjusts.

One of the greatest things about Qur'an is it has these metaphors that actually adjust as humanity adjusts. It's not just saying, "We don't use 'thee' and 'thou' anymore, so we'll re-write the Bible." No, it's actually meanings and semantics that change. New words and concepts appear. Now there is a word called "Google." "I'm going to Google something." It's also a noun. "Go to Google." Everyone now knows what that means, and it transcends English language. An Arabic speaker will say, "Google." A Farsi speaker will say, "Google." If something is going to be relevant, universal, transcendental and transformational, and it comes from Allah, Who is the Knower and Creator of all things, it has to have a dynamic, transformational characteristic. It has to be applicable. Inherent in the process, there has to be a way of assigning some kind of semantic to a spiritual text that will allow it to vary as humanity changes, change as humanity changes. That's the introduction.

There are two kinds of *majāz*: *isti'ara*, and *mursal*. It's important to know how they operate, because we are talking about what is happening inside of us to allow us to understand what it is we are studying and reading. All these people who read and study Qur'an, and make *tafsir* of Qur'an and everything, unless they grasp this dynamic process and allow their meditation to reveal to them the inner meaning of metaphor – which is why all those Persian poets wrote what they wrote, and why Saadi's text "The Walled Garden" is a Sufic text for transformation – unless you understand that, it's all going to be on the surface. Sure, you'll get meaning and understand things more, but why be satisfied with just that?

There are also things that we'll talk about, when we get back to this, that make it

impossible. [There are] barriers that are set up that make it virtually impossible for understanding to take place, like the barrier of the intellect. It makes it impossible for the deeper meaning to be understood. Herein lays the rational reason (if you want to use a rational term for something that is subjective) for separating the reason for knowing about something, studying something and revealing something. You have a revealed text. Doesn't it make sense to have thought about, and reasoned over, and had the meaning *revealed*, instead of just studied on the surface? In that revealed text, there are guidelines and rules and regulations to be thought about. They don't exist with metaphor; or they do, with direct metaphor. One man wrote on it, and I'll try to get you his descriptions of it. He gets into pretty heavy physics: quantum tunneling, time, and how through metaphor, through this corridor or tunnel, one goes from one place to another place instantaneously. Think about how much knowledge you get from a beautiful metaphor instantaneously, without knowing anything about the subject other than what is observable. You don't have to know anything about the composition of the sun; you can just observe the sun one time. And when someone speaks of "light like the brightest sun in the heavens," in a simile, immediately you grasp it. This is such a simplistic way of saying it, but I have to stop now.

Question: Is the Qur'an presented strictly metaphorically? (No.) Is anything ever considered literally? (Yes.) Or is it both? (Very good!)

Shaykh: It's always both. I started off by saying there's a reality and a metaphor, but it's more than that. It is like an accelerator, the thing they send neutrons around. It's like! Everything we've ever invented is in the Qur'an. But people say, "Show me where it is!" That's what I'm trying to say, "It's *in* the Qur'an." Go find it. Go find an automobile in

the Qur'an. What does it mean, it's *in* the Qur'an? This process I'm talking about makes it a reality. It describes a process that is the reality of existence. It gives the example of it by the way the language is used, and the effect of that language, and the fact that it is constantly relevant to the time, place and circumstance. It's not that it describes an airplane in the Qur'an. Though, certainly the Prophet (sal) flew on Buruq. It's not that simplistic. If you get into the physics of it, you are actually talking about things like quantum tunneling and simultaneity. You are talking about passing through things that are solid.

These are metaphors, but [there is] also the idea of a corridor, which is like a tunnel. Things pass through this corridor at accelerated speeds and reveal certain things about the universe that we are a part of. [Try] to believe that the words that have been revealed by Allah in Qur'an have this capability, as you put them inside yourself, to create revelation about your own reality, your own existence, your own origin. You can be at the point of your own origin, and be at this point at the same time. (That's what you were implying, I know.) But that's what Qur'an is doing. That's what *dhikr* is doing. Am I just capturing it for our own philosophy and spirituality? I don't think so. I don't think it's just a matter of assigning ownership to this scientific reality and saying, "See? It's Islamic!" It's really the other way around. Where would you get this concept of *majāz* if it wasn't?

Think about someone thinking about it. Where would it come from? It has to come from somewhere. If you were a "believer," who saw the continuity in belief and faith, and if you look at the linguistics of Qur'an, and if you look at the universe around you, it comes from observation. It comes from that condensed metaphor that is being used to transmit to you this revelation that gives you insight/*basīra*, and the means to express it in an

expanded way or a contracted way, an open broad way or a smaller, more condensed way. Then when we pull back from the seeing, we find ourselves talking about the seven stations of the *nafs* and this and that, and all these dimensions you go through, and the development of the *latā'if*. Each *latīfa* has its own metaphorical reality, its own semantic and its own meaning. It has its own dynamic, transformational character and characteristic. As you drop off the veils and move through these different stations of *nafs*, then you see more clearly this relationship between the *dhāhir* and the *bātin*, between the *dunya* and the *akhirat*, between the seen and unseen world. You realize that you are moving in this corridor, sometimes at quantum speeds, if you want to use that metaphor.

How long does it take for compassion? Nano second. How long does it take for love? Two nano seconds. How long does it take for hate? A nano second. I just went to a very gross level, but it's the level of our every day life. What do we mean by how long? We talk about time in terms of distance. Most people don't even understand that time is measured in distance, like stars and light years. We say, how long does it take? Not, how fast does it take? We have this inherent understanding. This is what is so great about Tasawwuf. It tells us, here are the stations of the *nafs*, and of the soul, and of the *sirr*, and the *rūh*, *khafī*, and *akhfah*. Here are the things you go through that refine your ability to see. We make repentance, for example. What's happening internally? How do you make repentance? "I repent, okay fine. I repent of this and that." That's a reality. But then it's surrounded by events and circumstances that have other meanings you didn't see at the moment. Or you assigned a meaning to something that later on you realized was not correct, so you repent of it. There is this metaphor in there. It's too deep to talk about. But it's interesting. *Asalaam Aleikum..*