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Suhbat or the Oral Tradition: Being Present in the Presence

**Allahumma salle ‘ala sayeddina Muhammed al fatih oghliq wa-al Hatim
limaa-sabaq naser al haqq bil haqq wa-al haadi ila siratiqa-l-mustaqeem, wa
ala alehi wa sahbehi haqq qadrihi wa miqdarihi al adheem.**

*O Allah, shower Your blessings upon our master Muhammad,
The Opener of what has been closed, and the seal of what has passed,
the Champion of Truth by the Truth, and the guide to Your Straight Path,
and on his family and his companions
with the equivalent to the greatness due to his exalted status.*

INTRODUCTION TO THE ORAL TRADITION

There is a famous saying among the people of knowledge,

*Wa man ya’khuz al-‘ilmi ‘an shaykhin mushafahatan, kana ‘an al-zayghi
wa-l-tahreefi fi harami.*

Wa man yakun aakhizan al-‘ilmi min suhufin, fa-‘ilmuhu ‘inda ahli al-‘ilmi

ka-l-^cadami.

Whoever takes (oral) knowledge from a Shaykh, is kept in protection from misguidance and corruption.

And whoever takes knowledge from books, his knowledge (among people of knowledge) is nonexistent.

This saying refers specifically to the “oral tradition,” the value of *suhbat*, being in the physical presence of the teacher; listening to the teaching in “real time.” In today’s technological world, presence has taken on new meaning: virtual presence, ‘tele-presence.’ Nonetheless, the benefit of ‘real time’ presence, culturally altered for this day and age, still provides great benefit for the understanding, transmission, and progress of a sincere seeker and student. In much the same way, a love letter from a beloved can convey waves of emotions and love, is still not the same as being in the presence of the beloved.

Today, we have new means for transmission, yet the content remains the same, and the necessity for a bond of trust and love remains the carrier wave. Just as we are present with you today, both physically and virtually in this presence, words, visual cues, *niyyat*, and love will be expressed through this oral tradition, which encompasses discourse, poetry, stories, and conversations with the teacher or *pirs*. What transpires and is transmitted is more than just words, if you listen with your hearts. There is the possibility of awakening the *latā’if*, subtle organs of perception. *Suhbat* affords us the opportunity to be more attuned to the Divine Presence that is within and surrounding us. Understanding the potential of such a relationship and gathering requires more than attendance, but also attentiveness and a special form of *adab*, an *adab* described by the Sufi Master Kashani in the

following quotation,

[For spiritual progress] make tariq—servitude, need, modesty, reserve, humility and humbleness—your craft.

Being in that presence with the correct *adab*, hearing with your ears, your mind and your heart is more than just hearing words, as any lover will attest. There is something more, something palpable, something uplifting and profoundly insightful when one is, as we say, “*present in the Presence.*”

Mystical knowledge and devotional love is transmitted during *suhbat* in such a way that it can circumvent the knots of the rational mind and connect directly to the hearts of the seeker. *Suhbat* can be understood as a spiritual dialogue, a cleansing of the soul and a meeting of the hearts. From the metaphysical to the very physical, *suhbat* can help us reflect on the events of our everyday lives and guide us in our search for a sense of unity and security. As Mevlana Rumi said in his Mathnawi,

The Sufi’s book is not of ink and letters; it is nothing but a heart white as snow. (Mathnawi II.159)

Reflect for a minute on the importance of “live” discourse, words, and sounds, and the power they can have over our heart. Think of the power of what we hear and feel in recitation of Qur’an, or in the making of a *du’ā*, or in hearing poetry, such as the poems of Saadi, Mevlana Rumi, or Hafez. Mevlana says,

*Speech is a ship and meaning the sea.
Enter quickly, so that I may pilot the ship.*

This couplet suggests that this speech or poetry is a vehicle, a means of

travel. Reading poetry is thus an act of companionship - or *suhbat*. This is why it is necessary to eat a poem 'before the dust has settled on it'. 'Eating' what our host puts before us is a part of good manners (*adab*). In other words, Mevlana's poetry is written from, and thus for, a particular moment; although the content of that moment may change, it is still fundamentally about the connection inspired by it.

This power was exemplified many times in the life of the Prophet (sal) and his companions. As, for example, in the story of Hazrat Umar (ra)'s conversion to Islam:

Hazrat Umar (ra) had decided to kill Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). On his way to do this he bumped into one of the companions, who, on seeing him with his sword, asked where he was going. Umar (RA) replied he was going to put an end to Islam by killing the Prophet (peace be upon him).

The companion said to Umar (ra) 'Why don't you go and sort your own household first, before going to kill Muhammad (peace be upon him).'
Umar (RA) asked, 'What do you mean?' The companion replied, 'Do you not know that your sister and brother in-law have accepted Islam?' Upon hearing this Umar (RA) was furious and he stormed off to his sisters house.

When he arrived at his sister's house, she and her husband were reciting Qur'an. He stopped and listened. He asked to look at what they were reading. She told him that he would have to wash (purify himself) before touching it, so he went and washed and came back.

They showed him the part of the Qur'an that they were reading, which were the opening verses of Suratu Taha. Hazrat Umar (ra) asked immediately to

be taken to the Prophet (peace be upon him), where he accepted Islam and became one of the most faithful companions.

This story tells us of the Presence of Allah (swt), and the Prophet (sal) in the revelation, as well as in the hearts of the believer and the *muridīn*. This story also illustrates another important facet of *suhbat*—*zaman* and *makan*, time and place—being in the right place at the right time. The importance of making the effort and taking the time it takes to be in the presence of the *shaykh* and the *shuyukh* should not be underestimated.

In many stories this is represented with the metaphor of travelling long distances, or seeking out the beloved, as in the stories of Majnun and Leila; these carry an important message of patience, perseverance and striving. It is message that modern technology obviates, creating a lack of patience and willingness to understand and value the efficacy of those qualities. We expect instant responses, high speed Internet, easy answers, and results on our timeframe. But ease is not a goal for the Sufi, nor is hardship; but rather, the synergy created by the interaction of the two (ease and hardship) is part of the experience of developing *basīra* and *firāsa*, insight and discernment.

FA 'INNA MA 'A-L-USRI YUSRA. INNAMA 'A-L- YUSRI USRA.

So truly, with difficulty—ease. Truly, with difficulty—ease. [94:5-6]

LIGHT OF THE COMPANION

Again, I will quote Rumi's Mathnavi:

*How can I understand the things around me
when my companion's light is not around me?*

*But Love demands that these words shall be spoken;
how can a mirror be without reflection?*

*Do you know why your mirror tells of nothing?
The rust has not been taken from its surface.*

*Reflect upon this story, my dear friends;
its meaning is the essence of our state.
(Masnavi 1.32-35)*

Rumi asks here, “How can I understand the things around me/ when my companion's light is not around me?” As with any transfer of knowledge, only after it begins does one realize its value. Until one is the recipient of such knowledge, the “mirror remains dark,” and the value of the relationship between the recipient and the one who is transferring that knowledge or methodology remains unknown.

The relationship must begin with hope and confidence, as the process continues the trust deepens; an appreciation and humility on the part of the *murīd* (and also the *murshid*) will grow. This tradition is truly an affirmation of the historical and spiritual reality of the lineage of the Prophets (sal) and the dynamic ability of Islam to be relevant to the time and place (*zaman and makan*). It is a relationship that is deeply steeped in what is said and not said, conveyed through stories and examples, *dars* and more mystical encounters with breath, *dhikru-Llāh* and *ru'ya* (visions).

With that being said, let us also not forget the fundamental teaching of Sufi Orders, as stated by Kashani: ***“The aim of the Sufi is not the love of masters or saints, but the love of Allah.”***

We must recognize that what we consider ‘our’ life is all an extension of or reflection Allah (swt). Just as the light coming through our window is an extension of the light of the sun, we too can become illuminated by the light of

Allah. It is just as a story, concept or transmission travels between the consciousness of the *shaykh* to the *murīd*, vis a vis words or thought, from silence to words to silence, along the corridor of the *‘ālam al-mithal*. The light from the sun is not the sun, but it is of the sun, and expresses the qualities of the sun. It is all One: *wahid*, unity, oneness, one energy, one truth, one reality.

TRADITION OF SUHBAT

With that foundation, let me turn to look more closely at the subject of *suhbat*. The Messenger of Allah (swt) said:

The metaphor of a good companion and a bad companion is that of someone possessing musk and the bellows of the blacksmith. From someone possessing musk, you either buy it or smell its scent; while the bellows of the blacksmith either burns your body or your clothes, or you smell a foul odour from them.

In the Sufi tradition, *suhbat* holds an important and critical place. As Ahmad Farūqī Sirhindī (ra) said:

Tariqatun as-suhbah wa'l khayru fi'l jam'iyyah.

Our way is fellowship, and the goodness is in the gathering.

We should not in any way underestimate its value or importance as a method of coming nearer in the heart to the love and presence of the Prophet (sal), and as a means of developing the qualities of the loved ones of the Prophet and Allah (swt). Being in outer *suhbat*, the company of pious people, joining in *dhikr* (remembrance) and *du'ā* (supplications) softens the heart, opens the mind and makes easier the way to be “present in the Presence.”

Suhbat with the *shaykh* is association with all the *shuyukh* of the *silsila*,

extending all the way back to the Prophet Mohammed (sal). And association with the Prophet Mohammed (sal) is association with all the *anbiyā*, with the Archangel Jibreel, and eventually, of course, with Allah (swt) the realization and experience of Divine Presence: **“Wheresoever you turn, there is the countenance of Allah.”**

The quality that opens the door to this experience is yearning, an unquenchable thirst for understanding, for insight (*basīra*) and discernment (*firāsa*), knowing that this is a gift, a response from Allah (swt).

Rumi said, *“Sit in the company of saints and if nothing else, you will develop a longing.”*

What we must understand is that we are always under the spiritual guidance of our *shaykh*. The light of the *shuyukh* is always flowing to us, as it is flowing to them from the Prophet (sal), like the light is always flowing to us from the sun. It is a light that is characterized by *basira*; that has developed in the *shaykh* from the practices as well as the receptivity to the transmissions: *Sair-fi-Allah* (Journey in God), *Sair-bi-Allah* (Journey by God) and *Sair-ma-Allah* (Journey with God).¹ This station of constancy and the transcending of otherness and duality as indicated in the *hadith*—**“Whoever sees me sees (the truth).”**

Remember the operant concepts here are ‘seeing’ or ‘perceiving,’ and it requires light to see. Well, this is a very big subject, not for today. But suffice it to say that we must see by the light of one who awakens the insight and perception in us; by

¹ (sayr il’Allah) the journey of the traveler salik towards Allah, from the lower self—nafs—to the heart (qalb), this journey is through the unveiling of the asma or Names of Allah swt. Sayr I anfusi; where the salik contemplates the signs within their own self; sayr fi’llah: the journey of the salik from the names through the attributes (sifat) to wahidiyyah awareness of the oneness of Allah. Sayr ma’ Allah, the journey with Allah or the return journey to creation whilst subsisting in Allah (baqa) and seeing all things as manifestations or reflections of Allah swt)

the Nūr-i-Muhammad and those to whom that lantern has been passed. My beloved Shaykh, Hazrat Azad Rasool (qss), would say:

It is light...how much light you can absorb and how much light you can project. The more you sit in meditation, the more light you can absorb from the light of the shaykh and the shuyukh of our Order.

Just as we need the vitamin D from the sun, so too it is said in our *tarīqah* that our physical body needs to periodically be in the light of the *shaykh*. It can be once a week, or once a day, once a month; indeed it is a right and duty to visit the *shaykh* and to partake of that light. So we say, try not to make it longer than 40 days that you are absent from association with the *shaykh*, or at the least the pious people of *tarīqah*. This *suhbat* in the physical world will keep a person who is sincere moving towards their destination, towards *ihsan*. This is also why there is a tradition among our *shaykhs* to travel from *khanaqah* to *khanaqah*, in order to ease the burden of travel for the *murīd*.

SUHBAT WITH THE SHAYKH

The Prophet (sal) said:

“Do not keep the company of someone whose state does not uplift you or whose words do not guide you to Allah .”

As Sufīs, we must understand that there are many dimensions of *suhbat*. In the outer, the *suhbat* takes place in the coming together of pious people around the Shaykh, and in the private relationship, *munasabat*, with the Prophet (sal) in their heart. By focused practice, through *niyyat*, the believer becomes a conduit of spiritual energy (*fayyād*) that draws others toward the noble qualities and attributes of Allah (swt). This attraction (*jedhb*) is magnified in the gathering of true and

transformed seekers who join together seeking the presence of the Truth, the Love, and the Rahmat that is Allah (swt).

In the Naqshabandi-Mujaddidi tradition and schools of *fana and baqa*, these states are not sought after but come as a result of a refined meditation study and practice: culminating naturally in an awareness of and constant glorification of Allah (swt).

It is only through refinement of meditation remembrance (*dhikru-Llāh*) and being guided by the *shaykh* in the practices, through the *latā'if*, (subtle organs of perception), that one can experience this refinement of *suhbat* with the Prophet (sal) and approach *fana fi Allah*, the final stage on the journey of return to Allah (swt). From here there is endless travelling with the infinite unfolding of *marifat* from the Essence (*dhat*) itself. This is *baqa* (abiding in Allah, subsistence with Allah in perpetuity).

From this and other examples, we can understand that many unseen and unknown benefits come from *suhbat*.

Nizam al-Din Awliya mentioned about one darwish. When the darwish saw a person who did not belong to anybody, he used to say "He sits without balance." This servant asked "Does it mean without weights?" Nizam al-Din answered, "No. It means that for the one who belongs to a shaykh, whatever the murīd did would be put to his pir's balance in the last Day of Judgment. From this it is said that somebody is sitting without balance."

Association with the Shaykh and with spiritual companions gives the strength of accompaniment, through the soul, that allows us to persevere and progress on the path. Whether you know it or not, feel it or not, understand it or not, it does not matter. It is a transmission, *tawwajuh*, from our hearts to your

hearts. Our words may be the excuse for us sitting together today, but what is most important is the *suhbat*, the accompaniment *mayat-i-hubbi*...with love.

THE TRADITION OF TARIQAH

This being said, *suhbat* is not solely about the relationship with the *shaykh*, while that is of primary importance, the *tarīqah* itself—not just the individual relationship to the *shaykh* and teaching, but the collective group of individuals and the *shaykh*—is very important. Kashani wrote,

It is not only necessary to have a spiritual mentor, it is also highly recommended to belong to a tarīqah. Otherwise Sufism would turn into a chaotic training, an unruly mysticism. Tarīqa, conceived as the place of suhbat and adab, provides a community suitable for the candidates initiation.

And the Prophet (sal) said,

“A person’s spiritual practice is only as good as that of his close friends; so consider well whom you befriend.”

So consider well whom you befriend....

In the *zāwiya* or *tarīqa*— a community that is not just a social community— we find the means to unlock a mystery, the mystery of our own existence, the mystery of the Divine creation. And we can reveal the greater truth, the Haqq of Allah that resides deep in the *quwwal al batin*, the innermost part of the heart.

Traditionally, and still today, there is the necessity for a community of seekers to support the transmissions from the *shaykh* and the spiritual progress of the individual. In the spiritual community, certain capacities are developed and functions are enabled that allow both the individuals and the collective group to make tremendous progress. To be present in the company of the brothers and

sisters in *tarīqah* can give you a kind of spiritual power that can not only make your soul stronger, but also heal your body and calm your mind. Kashani wrote on this subject,

The necessity for a disciple to have a master is, of course, a common view among Sufis. Nevertheless the argument does not only regard the need for a master but also the importance of community. This second point, the sense of suhbat proves to be a fundamental aspect of the Sufi initiation, during which the disciple must integrate into the Sufi milieu, respect its way of life and organization, and remain distant from non-sufis.

In addition to the individual teachings, the seeker has relationships and responsibilities in the *khanaqah* (*zāwiya*). The aspirant has to help the teacher and the community, through whatever profession or capability they have in order to receive the fullness of the teaching. As long as you are engaged in some way, you have the potential of gaining the fullness of the teaching. As Kashani taught us,

[In the tarīqa] servitude (khidma) must be practiced without discrimination toward anyone.

We exist where Allah (swt) placed us, at the interface between the inner and the outer, the *dhāhir* and the *bātin*. The opportunities abound for selflessness, abasement, humility, service, generosity, turning ones attention away from the worldly (i.e. being in the world, not of the world). Khwaja Ahrar (ra) said,

There must be nothing worldly or other-worldly in your mind in suhbat; this is unruly. Neither ask for miracles (karamat), nor even stations (maqamat), nor more than what is permitted (halal) and necessary (zaruri).

The example of the community of the Prophet (sal) beautifully illustrates

this balance of the inner and outer. See how they chose to live their lives, certainly filled with piety, yet very much in the real world. Each responsibility, each decision in their worldly/daily life was referenced to the guidance of the Prophet (sal) and revelation. Still today, this is the custom and the reality among those of the *tarīqa*.

It reflects the reality of life. The REAL is a *wasila* (a means) to awakening to the Divine Presence, and at the same time a service to all humanity. This life, this place, this work, this opportunity is our school, our laboratory, our home. Each transmission, each *dars*, each encounter with the *shaykh* and the *murīdīn* can be a brick in the wall of the inner chamber, wherein Allah (swt) dwells. As the Prophet (sal) said, ***“The heart of the believer is the house of Allah.”***

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TIME

In conclusion, let me enjoin you once more not to waste your time or potential. Make the effort necessary to be “present in the Presence.” Abu Madyan quoted Al-Junayd (radhiya Allahu ‘anhu) as saying,

Beware! Do not waste your spiritual lights by dispersing and diluting them by mingling with those who are not your ‘type’ (abnaa’ al-jins). For you will be characterized by their [level of] knowledge. By doing this, your insight will be lost to you, your spiritual inspirations stolen from you, and you will be removed from Al-Haqq! This is my wasiyyah to you!

Khwaja Kashani warned of the danger of dealing with people who are exoteric. He said, *“Don’t sit with people who seek tasfiyyat (interpretation).”* i.e. Don’t sit with people who will interpret everything in order to remove the spirituality from it. He said, *“Rather, be among the Sufis. Have good and close relations with the people of Tariqah.”* And he meant specifically, the Khwajāgān,

the masters of wisdom. And Rumi wrote,

*In the realm of truth dervishes are worthy of praise.
They walk the highest path.
If you want to turn your copper-like soul into gold
Stay with them, they are the alchemy.*

The activity that is proper among the people of the Khwajāgān is *suhbat* (companionship), and the spiritual discussion between the *murshid* and the *murīdīn* (*suhbat*). Abu Madyan writes,

Remember the way of tasawwuf is to occupy one's self with other seekers of truth and especially murīds. Otherwise, the scent of the one who is insincere will rub off on you.

The best thing is to have *suhbat* with the *murshid*, and to be in the companionship of fellow seekers—nothing else. Don't waste your time with anything else; because life is short. As Kashani said:

*Since life is only a few breaths,
since the past is dead and the future is not yet born,
since this taifa considers each breath the last one,
the person who wishes to enter tariqah needs to practice constant concentration.*

CLOSING DUA

May Allah bless you and protect you in your health, and protect your soul. May Allah make a way for those of you who find yourself falling away from the *suhbat* of pious people and into the hands of Shaytan; may you choose to turn toward Allah and know that that in that moment of turning toward Allah, you can be saved. The real power of the Tariqah lies in our ability to work together as individuals to help one another move along to the end of this journey. And the end of the journey is far more than what is at the end of this physical body and physical journey.

Through *suhbat*, we are following in the footsteps of the Prophet (sal) and his companions and the spiritual heirs of the Prophet (sal) our *shuyukh*. Through our actions and our prayers, we are asking that Allah shelter us, keep our physical body strong, protect our souls, keep us from falling into the clutches of Shaytan.

*Allahumma rahmatoka arjuu,
Fa laa tikilnee illaa nafsee tarfata
Ayninw-wa aslih lee sha'nee kullahu
La ilahaa illaa anta.*

**Allah, for Your mercy do I hope
So do not leave me to myself (even) for an instant,
And set right for me all my affairs.
There is no god except You.**

Cleanse us, cleanse our environment, and help us to be grateful for whatever small, or large task, task we might have that challenges us. Through *suhbat*, turning to Allah, through the presence of the Prophet (sal) in the depths of our hearts, and keeping company of the *auliya* of Allah (swt), we will overcome the challenges and be better able to serve Allah and His creation. We will be able to know our self and realize how near that Reality, called and worshipped as Allah, is.

Allaahumma j'al hubbaka ahabba ilayya min nafsee

Wa-sam'ee, wa-basaree, wa-maalee, wa-ahlee,

Wa- min-l-maa 'il-baarade li'l atshan

Oh Allah, make Your love dearer to me than myself and my hearing and my sight and my property and my family and more than cool water for the thirsty.