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Thursday



Title: The Rules of the Order: Awareness of Breath

DVD title: The Rules of the Order: Awareness of Breath
Breathing to Prepare for Something Else

You will discover, if you care to, that the Rules of the Order, or the secrets of the secret, have parallels. For example, “watching your steps” has a parallel with *mushahadah*, direct witnessing. We can’t make a one to one association with every one very easily, but you will find with certain of them there are associations that will help you understand certain principles within Sufism and Islam; and secondly, they will prepare you. Maybe I should switch these around. They will prepare you for understanding. They will prepare you for awakening, for knowing yourself. They prepare you.

I noticed, and this has been bothering me for some time, these [Rules of the Order] are out of order [on the blue card for prayer times]. I have to tell Abul Hasan to change the order of them [on the card], which also means you have to change the order of your recitations [in sema]. That’s good; it will help you keep it in mind. Awareness breath should come first: *hosh dar dam*. Try to understand that any action we take requires thought on some level, consciously. Keep that in mind as I talk a little about “awareness of breath.” For any practice that a Sufi does – and I’m going to talk about Sufis, but obviously this applies to life in general – and any practice a sincere Muslim takes (whether prayer, *du’a* or *wudu*, etc), breath is an essential ingredient. Whether the exercise is individual or the practices being done are collective, like reading tonight, breath is important.

If we were just trying to recite Qur'an, it takes a lot of training. Anyone who does that training knows how important breathing is. Our intention in reciting aloud, however, should be to recite it correctly. Many of us have flaws in our recitation. Some of us have very great flaws in our recitation. But the mere utterance of Qur'an collectively, with the right *niyyat*, has a profound effect on the individual, on the group, and on society at large. This tradition of reading aloud appears in all religions to some extent, whether Gregorian chants or reciting the Talmud or Buddhist chanting. Anywhere you go in the world you have aloud recitations. Some people think it's just to get the attention of God or gods; okay. Some people understand there is some kind of energy that is being activated in that sense. Most people at some level have discovered there are certain types of recitation, chanting, repetition or remembrance, which when done in conjunction with the breath, have both an external and an internal effect.

Breathing is very important. How it's done and why, from the point of view of the Khwaja Khwajāgān and the Naqshbandī (and that's not to say others don't have similar ideas) is important. For example, if you are doing a practice of breathing, it should quiet down after a while to a certain rhythm, and it will do that naturally if you don't force it. You don't force it to be fast or slow, because if you force your breath, you are taking energy away from what the purpose is. Your intention is on forcing the breath to do something, and that energy and attention should be better used for something else. One of the problems many yogis had was they were forcing the breath to do certain things, or trying to stop the breath. The breath may stop naturally; but if you try to stop it, then the purpose of the breath becomes lost, and the purpose becomes the breath itself. Does that sound familiar? I'm sure you could apply that to many things in life.

You have to know how to allow the breath to become balanced, harmonious and stabilized. One of the things that happens when we are upset, afraid, have some

grief and fear is our breath changes. Then you have a hard time controlling it. You know that if you could control it, you'd calm down. "Calm down, breathe. Take a deep breath." You know the mental state will shift when the breathing shifts. It's inherent in us to know that. We do this automatically. A child automatically tries to catch their breath, tries to get their breath back to normal if they are upset. "Awareness of breath" is not called controlling the breath; and it shouldn't be called watching the breath. "Awareness of breath" is exactly that: to be aware of the breathing without being overly occupied with it. Sometimes it's deep; sometimes it's shallow. There are certain exercises that are done, as you know.

For example, the odd number of breathing and holding the breath has to be taught by someone who understands it. It has to be practiced correctly, otherwise you become obsessed by it. I don't know how far some of you have gotten with it; and that's interesting. I'll talk about why I don't know that in a few minutes. But if you are doing three, five, seven, nine, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, seventeen, nineteen, and twenty-one breaths, you are holding your breath and counting to that number. For example, if you are doing fifteen/fifteen: you are holding your breath, counting fifteen, fifteen times. That's a lot.

It has to be taught - when to do it and why to do it, and all that. You could read it in a book and do it, but then you will become obsessive about it and not doing it for the right reasons. Also, the "awareness of breath" has to be in a certain way. As you know, we always start with yogic breathing: not to breathe from up here (the chest) but from your abdomen. After you practice it for a while, it becomes very natural for you. If you practice for a week, it will become natural to breathe correctly, or you spend your lifetime breathing incorrectly. You take a breath, and your stomach goes out; then you fill your lungs. On the out breath, your lungs

empty first, and then your abdomen empties. That's a method, a technique, and it has an important function.

Also, realize that certain breathing affects the *latā'if*. When we say, "Allah, Allah, Allah," *panch dharb*, striking the heart; it affects the heart. It's designed for that. It's a constructed form of breathing. When you do deep breathing, it shouldn't be artificial. You don't hold your breath until you get high. But if we are making *dhikr jahri*, and doing certain breathing, you might very well go into an ecstatic state. If the breath helps you do that, that's fine. That's the intention of that; it's one of the purposes of that. To be aware of how the breath can be used to move your consciousness into another state. That has to be guided. Even if you have permission to do it, you have to do it in a circumstance and place that is conducive for a positive result. It is not to get high, not to get power, not to show off, not to make your ego think it's great. It is not because you haven't gotten dizzy in 25 years since you smoked dope, and not because you want to hyperventilate. This is not awareness of breath.

The purpose of "awareness of breath" is not to control the breath. If, when you are doing an exercise or practice, like the number of breaths I was talking about, and your breath is measured—that's fine. Not only is it fine; it is correct. It's not forced; it's not too long; it's not too short. It's simple and it has the right rhythm. But there are times when we are doing certain *Shadhilī* or *Qadrī dhikr* aloud (Shaykh demonstrates different kinds of breathing), and that's fine. It's within a certain tradition. But it is still not what we mean when we say "awareness of breath." It's using the breath for a certain purpose that you may know or not. You may or may not understand. The breath is primarily used for one thing in the physical world: to purify, to oxygenate your blood. It's also used to express thoughts, and think beautiful things, and sound alarms; but its primary purpose is to keep us alive.

Also [you have] to realize that personalities, certain characters, have a certain tempo of breathing. I alluded to that earlier. Do you want to change your state of mind? If you've noticed that by changing your attitude, your breath changes; then conversely by changing your breath you can change your state of consciousness and mind. This was known by ancients and is nothing new. It's been used for millenniums as a means of self control. Still and all, it is not exactly what we mean by "awareness of breath." Depending on the person, the school, the moment, these are all correct. There is nothing wrong with it.

If you learn certain practices, especially during *dhikr*, you learn which *dhikr* does what kind of exercise. (Shaykh demonstrates *dhikr*:) *Allah hādirī, nādirī, shāhidī, ma'ī*. What does it mean? What's *hadr*? Presence. *Nadhr* is to see. *Shāhidi* is to witness. Think about it. *Ma'ī*—striking the heart. These are all on the breath. That is an exercise done with the breath in the Naqshbandī tradition, often done silently. I do it aloud, but sometimes I might give it to you to do silently. When you do it silently and you are not in a group, you are going to have to find the right rhythm for it. It will be like a laboratory experiment. When should I say *hādirī*? When should I say *nādirī*, or *shāhidī*, or *ma'ī*? What's supposed to happen? You should have no breath left. You have to have a space at the end of that, because the human being will naturally, as soon as the breath is out, try to grab breath again. On *ma'ī* you hold it. (Demonstrates holding and then taking the breath and beginning again: *hādirī, nādirī, shāhidī, ma'ī*.) Empty. Are you sure? (Demonstrates emptying his breath, and then emptying more.) Empty.

Then your mind starts to think, what does it mean to be full? What does it mean to be empty? All these things come into your mind if you really do these exercises.

If you really do them, they are not just things you do in the *dhikr*. Naturally, certain types of thoughts come to you. Because you are working with something. If you are working with water, you will think about wet. If you are working with fire, you will think about hot. If you think about breath, you will think about life, fullness, and emptiness. You are going to think about *qurb* and *bast*. When you are doing an exercise, the breath has a certain measurement to it. It's not labored; it's not short. In certain traditions, the breath is used in certain ways for certain purposes. (Shaykh demonstrates breathing with the *dhikr*: *hayy – hayy – hayy*. What does *hayy* mean? Alive. Living. Al-Hayyu, the Ever-Living. You are asking Allah to come to you. But as you do these practices, you are going to work out that kind of rhythm yourself that works with your self. Otherwise, you'll force it, and there will be resistance and tension where there should be relaxation.

What's wrong with this (the blue card with the list of the Rules of the Order) is that ["awareness of breath"] is not first. It should be first, because first comes breath. Allah breathed into the clay, and when life comes, breath comes. It comes first. There are reasons for that. I gave you one. Obviously it's a physiological necessity. Again, being aware of your breath doesn't mean obsessed by watching it. It doesn't mean being fixated on it. In fact, whenever you are doing any kind of exercise or meditation, the breath becomes calm. In meditation, your breath becomes like between sleep and wakefulness. If I say to you, watch your breath (which is different than being aware of your breath), you'll realize that sometimes your out-breath is longer than your in-breath. Sometimes vice versa. Sometimes the ratio between breaths is short. (Shaykh demonstrates different short breathing patterns.)

When you are doing *dhikr*, your breathing takes on a certain rhythm to it. It's not necessary that it's always exactly the same. You have to allow it to slow down naturally. That's why after you get an instruction from me, like to breathe 3 - 5-

7- 9 -11 times, I don't tell you how long each breath should be. I don't have you breathe for me so I can hear how you are breathing. I will do it when I teach someone how to breath, so I'll know if they are breathing correctly. But that's all. If you are sitting and there is noise in the background, like you are sitting in New York City on a balcony and you are practicing your meditation, believe me, the noise in the background is going to affect the rhythm of your breathing. You have to get past that noise. If you decide to put on some nice wave sounds, or some white noise, it's going to affect your breathing.

Some people will go to the ocean and breathe in harmony with the waves. That's fine. That's still not "awareness of breath." It has an effect. My brother in law used to say to me, "You meditate, but I have my meditation. I go and listen to the ocean. I have my own way." "Yes, you do, and you'll have your own results." It's fine. We're not putting a value judgment on it (or at least not too much of one). What's the *niyyat* ? What's the intention? What's the purpose? When you understand the purpose, you will be aware of your breath. You will be aware of whether that purpose is being fulfilled. Obviously, from a physiological point of view, if you take a deep breath, it is better for you because you will get more oxygen. If you take too deep a breath, you will hyperventilate and fall over. Nuradeen will maybe tell his clients, breathe deeply, because it will calm them down, and give them some peace, and get rid of their anxiety.

Being aware of one's breath is not the same as watching it. It doesn't have any "Am I doing this right or not" in it. When you establish "awareness of breath," you have to understand one thing and only one thing: the purpose of being aware of your breath is to prepare you for something else. It's not an end in itself. From our point of view, awareness of breath is for something else. It is not to get you high, not to flip you over. It's to prepare you for something else. Maybe if I say, "Giff" or "Piff" at the time you are breathing, it's to catapult you to something

else. You establish awareness of breath only for the purpose of going into some other practice or activity, which is usually *dhikr* or *muraqabah*. The focus of the *niyyat* is to establish the breathing so that you can then do the *dhikr* more properly, or you can do your meditation more fully, or you can contemplate something more deeply, or you can even make a decision better in your day to day life. I have talked about how to apply this in your day to day life. Why? It does reduce tension and anxiety. It does create more oxygen in your body. It does calm you. It does create something we will study later: time pause. It does all those things. But for our purposes, it is to be aware that the breathing is for something else. That's "awareness of breath": to be aware that the breathing is for some other activity.

Why do you do breathing in exercises? To prepare for another activity. It is not to watch your breath. You watch your breath when you are doing a certain exercise (such as *hādirī*, *nādirī*, *shāhidī*, *ma'ī*), and you let it settle into a normal thing. As you are doing it, now the concentration is on *hādirī*, *nādirī*, *shāhidī*, *ma'ī*. You are watching it, in the sense that you start the practice. (Again, the Shaykh demonstrates breathing with the *dhikr*, "Allah, Allah, Allah.") You are aware of it, and you find the right rhythm, except in the *sama*. The *shaykh* finds the right rhythm because there is a whole other collective purpose, because now all these bodies are all one. All the breathing is one breathing. The one who is controlling that breathing is the *shaykh*. The *shaykh* knows where that is going to go, or where he wants it to go, or what the possibility is.

When you are sitting alone, doing other practices; then you control it. It has to come to a rhythm, and it has to settle. It shouldn't be compulsive, and it shouldn't be watched over. It's attended to. You are aware of it, for another purpose. In the *dhikr*, you don't know what the purpose is exactly. You know the general purpose is to remember Allah, to be open to that Divine Presence, to be in some kind of

rhythm with something that is going on, that somehow the *shaykh* has some sense of what is happening. In that dome, in that *masjid*, in that *tekkia*, in the *zāwiya*, all the elements that are there can be coalesced into something that will affect your *latā'if*, your insight, your *basīra*, your hearing, your seeing. And, if it's collectively achieved or even individually achieved, it has a collective effect. When you move out of that space, now it is up to you to let it settle.

When you meditate, you let it settle for the purpose of your *muraqabah*, or your *tafakkur*, for the purpose of bringing forward any of the *sifat* of Allah (swt), for the purpose of enlightening your *latā'if*. A person's goal, in terms of establishing a certain rhythm of breathing, is that you recognize yourself when you achieve this harmony in your breathing. That's a goal. You don't need the *shaykh* saying to you, "You're not breathing correctly," unless it's in a group; or for some reason, the *shaykh* knows what your intention is, watches you, and says, "If you do this breathing, it will be better for you." But *you* will do it, and *you* will establish the harmonic resonance. Don't you see, this is all completely understandable when you understand the system we are operating under. Eventually, the idea is you should be in control, or aware of and in harmony in yourself with the process you are doing in meditation and *dhikr* and contemplation.

There is an *adab* to that, too. If your intention is good, and if where you are is constructed for that practice—like the *khanaqah*, or a place where you sit at home, or the forest, or the stream—you will be able to determine yourself if your *niyyat* is correct, if you feel comfortable in your breathing, and if the breathing is achieving its purpose. Of course, a person can teach you how to breathe, but the most important thing is that you understand that "awareness of breath" is you are aware of the breath; you understand it has a purpose; and as your breathing become harmonious and relaxed and normalized to the circumstance and situation and intention, then you can move on to the next practice. Then it will help your

dhikr or *muraqabah*. The next thing we will talk about will be *nazar bar qadam*, watching your steps

Q&A

Student: Is it the same as breath in *salat*?

Same thing. That's why, how consistent the system is. You have *sunnah*, you have *fard*, you have *nafle*. Take *dhuhr* prayer for an example. Conceivably, you establish the rhythm yourself, and then you move on to the *fard*. *Fard* is done in *jamat*, being led by the *imam*. You don't know which *sūrah* he will recite. He could recite a long one. I'm using *dhuhr* prayer for a reason. At *maghrib* or *isha* you might know what *sūrah* he will recite and approximately how long it will take to recite it, especially if you know the *imam* and how he recites. But at *dhuhr* and *asr* you don't have any idea. He could be doing Suratu-l-Kahf or Sūratu Ala', you don't know. You will have to adjust your breathing to his, and back and forth.

Now you are aware of the breath in another way, because you are trying to settle. You don't want to think about breathing while you are doing prayer. As you practice breathing and you become aware, it becomes second nature to you to settle your breath. The Prophet (sal) gave us a hint on that by telling us to let our bones settle in prayer. Now you are in total control of that when you are praying by yourself, but not in *jamat*. The *imam* is saying when you go down and when you get up. But you can still let our bones settle. You can relax. Prayer is an analogy to breathing. It has a rhythm to it. You settle into the rhythm of the prayer. There is breathing within the prayer. Then there is the prayer itself, which is like breathing. You settle into the pray, and you move. When you move, it's like an out-breath. When you settle, it's like an in-breath. Or it could be the other way around.

If the intention is to pray correctly; that is to say, form; and to pray correctly internally, that is to settle, a rhythm is established. That rhythm of prayer is analogous to the rhythm of breathing, and within that, there is breathing. If your *namaz* is being done in a good rhythm, your breath will follow it. You don't have to try to breathe; the movement itself will control your breathing, but you can be aware of that. Then it's done for another purpose. What's the purpose of the prayer? That's why there have been so many books written on prayer. It's not like it is a complicated thing to learn. How many books have been written on just the word *Bismillah*? Think about it.

The form and movements of prayer are analogous to breathing. You settle your bones and create a rhythm. You move when the *imam* is leading, and you are under the control of the *imam*. That's *fard*. You come into it subtle, because you did your *sunnah*. You do the *fard*. Now you do your *sunnah* again. You enter, you do something, and you exit the same door you enter. If you do the *nafle* prayer, you are even more subtle. The disturbance, under the control of the *imam*, can't be a disturbance, because it's *jamat*. This is now the group breathing together. Now you get into the rhythm of the group breathing again, and you leave your control. Now you are under the control of the *shaykh* (or *imam*) again in this case. Now the whole group is going to breathe together and relax together. Then you are going to break away from that, like in the *dhikr* when you become ecstatic. You break away from it, but only because you are in the group do you achieve that state. Now you are back doing it yourself, settling in yourself.

It's a good question. And also, the meaning. You will find a lot of Sufis like me, and others wiser than me who might be *hafez* of Qur'an, who will recite the same *sūrah*s over and over again, like my Shaykh did. Different *tariqah* have different purposes, and sometimes the group has a certain need to understand certain things. Then you will find *imams* who want to show off. They'll just keep reciting and

reciting. They will be out of rhythm with the group; everyone will be restless. That's why the Prophet (sal) said, "Don't make it hard for people. Make it easy for them. Don't make them dislike it." People say, "We should do this one at this time," and so forth. This is a problem I have with certain people. "This is the night of such and such and we should do 150 things of that and 250 things of that, and 400 of these." Those are fine, but sometimes it just doesn't fit the time, place, circumstance, or people. How could it then have a positive effect? It's rules and regulations! There is something to be said for tradition. "We are doing this for tradition." Okay. We're not going to get anything from this; we are doing it for tradition. Or we are going to get only what the tradition will give us, but we are not going to get anything from the moment. But our path is to seize the moment. That means you have to become very attuned to the moment.

Sometimes it's good. We haven't done it in a long time, but some time we should sit and do 365 Hizb ul Bahr, for example. I do it only when I feel it is the right moment to do it; I don't do it every Thursday night. But there's no problem with reading Qur'an every Thursday night, because it makes the moment. So I have a problem with people saying, "It's this night, therefore we have to do this." At least there has to be something different about it—maybe it's the *dars*. Otherwise people start thinking they are going to go to hell if they don't do this, and it becomes very problematic. On the other hand, lest I give you the wrong impression, freedom is not just doing whatever you want to do whenever you want to do it. You have to understand how to read the moment.