

December 19, 2009

Saturday

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Title: [The Rules of the Order: Watching One's Steps](#)

DVD title: The Rules of the Order: Watching One's Steps
Paying Attention to What Is Before You...Naturally

Bismi-Llāhi-r-Rahmāni-r-Rahīm. We talked last night about *hosht dar dam*, awareness of breath. Tonight, we'll talk about *nazar ba qadam*: watching one's steps. What "watching one's steps" means is paying attention to the time, place and the circumstances, and to the opportunities that are before you—the opportunities to act, and the opportunities not to act. We can think of it in terms of to activate or de-activate, or action and non-action. You can see that de-activating something might be very positive, like to deactivate a bomb. Deactivation or non-action can be a very positive thing, as well as action. You can make the case for the fact that non-acting is a kind of action, because it takes place in time. [With] action or non-action, activation or de-activation the idea is you should do or not do something for positive reasons. So a movement, or an action, or reading something, or performing some practice that has a positive and useful result comes under the rubric of "watching your steps."

Inaction or deactivation in this sense means to halt something or even to pause, to go into a kind of neutral state, to stop and think about what you are about to do, or about to say. Is that what you really want to say? Think about how you are doing that. So a pause is also "watching your steps." You can think about it if you want in terms of walking. How about climbing a mountain with a glacier on it, with lots of snow and avalanches around you. "Watching your steps" becomes pretty obvious. Pausing, looking, analyzing, making a determination, and then going forward. This is *nazar ba qadam*: watching your steps.

If you think it has only to do with obviously spiritual things, it's problematic. Again, we are in a situation where you come to realize that these Rules are things that become you. They have to come naturally from you. They cease to become rules, and become a way of life, part of your character, part of your personality. Like I said night before last, you can't possibly remember everything. I was on the phone to someone, and they said, "Oh, I'll remember that the next time." I said, "It's pretty hard to remember all the things you should remember. I doubt that you will. You may remember something that has to do with a specific circumstance, because it was pointed out to you." I pointed out something to the person, [to which they replied], "Yeah, they will remember that." Maybe *that*, but will you remember to apply the principle in a hundred other situations that are similar? But you don't see the similarity, unless it becomes part of you. Then the chances are that you are going to act in a righteous way, or spiritual way, or truthful way, because it becomes part of you.

Memorizing rules and regulations is problematic, unless you go over them a lot, unless you return to them a lot in the external practice. Buddhist monks with their beads, yogis with their beads, or Sufis with their beads, or [Catholic monks with their beads, praying the rosary], "Hail Mary, mother of God..." Unless you go over it, it doesn't become part of you. It just becomes a supposed to, and it goes into the file of supposed-tos. When that file gets filled up, do you know what people do? They say, "To heck with it. I don't want this file any more. I want to do what I want to do! I'm not going to follow any rule." So the thing that was a reminder to you to do something in a good way becomes a reminder to rebel. "Watching your steps" has to be positive.

To pause, to think, "It's better to do something rather than nothing" is good, although it's not always correct. Sometimes it's better to do nothing, to wait. Sometimes you know if you say something, the person will take it the wrong way. They will respond the wrong

way, and you will be worse off than whatever it was you were trying to point out to them. It's better to do nothing, or to do something different, or to pause and think about it. We've all had that experience. That's "watching your steps." When you use the energy you have in the right way, then it multiplies. If you use the energy you have in a way that is not right, you get frustration, confusion, resistance from people or from circumstances or the universe. But the right action, done at the right time, under the right circumstances is the secret of *nazar ba qadam*. If you are "watching your steps," you'll get nearer and nearer to doing what you need to do, and it will become clear to you that you are watching your steps. But it won't be bounded by some marker in the universe.

Also, "watching over your steps" is paying attention to the time in the way we normally talk about it: the time it takes you to do something, how many steps it takes, [what is the best] procedure, how to make things most pious, most attentive, most conscious. It is not how to do things in the quickest, most unobtrusive way. Paying attention to action and inaction has to do with the right time and right circumstances to do a specific thing. It's why you find in most spiritual practices specific times for prayer, specific times for meditation. These are the best time to do this. Are they cosmically the best times? Maybe. But they are the best times because you do it at that time, at those intervals every day, and you actually imbue the time and the place with *bāraka*. You actually create the environment for success.

If you meditate, but then you don't meditate; if you pray but then you don't, you are adding exponentially to the level of complexity. You are not going to create a pattern, a rhythm. Anyone who plays an instrument knows that rhythm is very important. If you are drumming, and the drumming is not to that *maqam* [of the group], it throws everyone off. There is a reason why you pray five times a day at the times you pray; and there is a reason why people tend to fall into schedules, and eat when they eat, and sleep when they sleep, and meditate when you meditate. There are reasons for this. To make sure you do

that, and watch how you do that, and watch that you do that, that's "watching your steps."

Then you begin to know that when you feel it is the right time and right place, and the right circumstance to do something, and you do it, it's because you are attuned. It is coming from inside of you. Or you know not to do something, to refrain, because action is not always the right thing. Historically, you used to see these word pictures, or cartoons of people railing against nature, railing against the rough sea, as if you could tame the sea. The idea of the pictures was to show a human being trying to stop the thunder and lightning, the metaphor meaning that Allah is everything. You can't act like that in your life. You go back to the fact that humility and gratitude are two of the cornerstones of the building. You can't possibly have humility or gratitude unless you watch your steps. Unless your action or inaction is appropriate. Watching over your steps, if you do it correctly, not only is it not a situation of anxiety, it works to the opposite. If you watch your steps, embrace something, follow it and do your best, then you are enabling your soul to be freer. It's not buried under a lot of adjustments or apologies. It's positive.

It would have been fine, theoretically, if I would have said to myself, "Be careful here. It's icy and snowy. You could fall down." And in fact, I did do that. As I walked out onto my lawn yesterday, I said, "Ah, this is a little slippery. I should be careful how I walk." Boom! I fell down. So being aware of something doesn't necessarily mean you are in control of something. I was aware of exactly the thing that made me fall. I was trying to walk very carefully, but it was on the grass. An early snow had fallen. My legs just went out from under me.

The reasons why I, and some of my predecessors, say of these teachings is they are not techniques. I call them practices, and I wish I could call them something else. The reason they are not techniques is they have to come from inside of you. You have to understand them. You are taking and applying something. But yes, you have to practice. You have

to think about it. You have to intend it. In that sense, it's a practice. If I'm an expert pianist, like Roya is, which I'm not, I have to practice a piece. But eventually you get to the point where the capability, the capacity, the art comes naturally. The piece you have to practice, and to some degree by practicing the piece, it increases your capacity and talent. But the curve is different. The learning curve of the piece is like this, but the curve of your talent is something else. You develop capacity. Now, you practice the piece, but that's not teaching you as much piano as it was when you started practicing for the first time, and the idea of practicing a piece was to learn how to play piano. Now, you know how to play the piano, and the idea is to play the piece beautifully and correctly. It's different. That's what I mean by coming inside of you.

You practice watching your steps, but the idea is you develop the capacity to do that. You practice breathing, but it becomes natural. You practice *dhikr*, but it comes naturally. You go and look and say, "*Wa'alahi*, the snow, what a gift of Allah." You are not just saying it. A million people could say it, and one person could really be seeing it. Everybody else is seeing it, like a painting or something of *dunya*. But someone else is seeing it, and it reminds them of Allah. It's *dhikr*. The snow is *dhikr*. That's the crux of Islam and Tasawwuf. That's what we mean when we say that Sufism is something that has to be experienced. If you make you effort, it's not going to happen, probably, but by the will of Allah. You are waiting for Godot. Remember the play, "Waiting for Godot?"

You have to understand, though you put some effort, it has to be positive effort. This is not about tension and anxiety, which often accompanies the idea "I have to practice. I have to pray. I have to do this and that." That happens from the outside, [rather than], "I have to because I have to." I used to tell people who asked me why I do what I do, "[I do it] because I have to." No one's making me. I have to do it. It has to be appropriate, and natural. Think about a cat. It's very natural for the cat to act and not act, to be paused, and to wait to spring on its prey. It comes naturally, innately. I was watching these

embryonic pictures of a cat on television. You could see it was learning the first steps of how to wash itself in the womb. Natural.

Think of it this way, a pilot studies and is trained. But when it comes to action, it has to come naturally. Like the pilot (Capt. Sullenberger) who landed the plane in the Hudson River, it had to be second nature. It came from inside of him. You've heard me say this a hundred times. The problem is you have to remember the Rules and to think about them. So you have to make some effort, but there can't be tension. Just think about the things you can't get out of your mind because they have an emotional or intellectual impact on you. Just think when you got into some trouble, or had some worry, or you were grieving over something. You can't get it out of your mind. Think about putting something good into your mind that you can't get out. Or should we make the assumption that human beings can only keep something in their minds that have a tremendous emotional impact on them. If that's true, then maybe you cultivate an emotional relationship with the path. But you will never get there by just thinking about it. You will never get there with the attitude of, what's the Arabic word, *mañana*. If you do, it will only be momentarily.

There is a difference between tension and attention. Catholics always talk about sins of omission and commission. It's a similar concept. If you know what is right and wrong, and you don't pay any attention to it, and you don't do what is right, that's a sin of omission. That's inaction that has a negative effect; just like you could have inaction that has a positive effect. Like a doctor who hesitates and thinks, "Maybe I shouldn't make the cut here. Let me look at it again." And he realizes he should not make the cut there. That is inaction with a very positive intention behind it. "I intend not to make a mistake. Let me not act. Let me look at something." Watching oneself, watching one's behavior, watching what one says and does and thinks, this is all perfectly okay.

All societies have certain rules and norms and legal requirements and expectations, and you accept them. You watch your behavior in certain circumstances. Don't speed when

you know there's a speed trap. Don't say bad words in front of the priest. If you say bad words in front of the *imam*, you get in trouble. But far beyond those rules and regulations is something else: watching one's steps. Therefore, you have to use a certain amount of caution, of attentiveness, in life. And you have to give up the idea that paying attention is somehow draining my battery.

There is a setting on the Iphone that tells me how much battery time I have if I don't do anything, or if I do this. It tells me how much data time I have, etc., but it makes you think you will drain the battery if you do certain things. The truth is if you do certain things, there is an app that will give you more energy. If I put my phone down and don't touch it, it takes days for it to run out of battery. But if I have an application running, it will only take hours to run out. You have been given ways to extend time. What will you do with the time? If you are like me, you only have to sleep four hours a night. What do you do with the other four you used to sleep? You think it's only assigned to sleep; therefore, you think if you use it in any other way, you will not benefit from it. But if you use it for *muraqabah*, for meditation, then you benefit tremendously from it. How do you know? You start developing insight and intuition, and it proves to be an invaluable gift and blessing.

“Watching over one's steps” means you are watching the circumstances while you are feeling when it's the right time for action, everything will come together. It's not as simple as saying that action is doing something and inaction is doing nothing. That's not true. What's most important is to say that putting yourself down on the table is a good idea periodically; pausing, watching yourself, watching how you observe, and then turning your attention to Allah. “Allah, I have these really serious questions about You. If I leave you in the refrigerator too long, do you get stale, like other living things? Do you have a shelf life?” Most people don't talk to Allah that way. Sometimes I do. Allah is only good until 2043.

In the realm of timelessness, in the realm of *muraqabah*, in the realm of *dhikr*, “watching your steps” has both a literal and a figurative meaning. “Watching your steps” means moving with everyone else, and watching how you step, trying to do things correctly, not just shuffling along. “Watching your steps” means when you bow in *dhikr*, you should bow in *dhikr*, not have 4/5 of you bowing, and the other [part of you] standing up straight. “Watching your steps” means to bring the things you need for tomorrow, but only tomorrow, to one place and putting them there. Because you have watched your step, concentrated, and now you are on the verge of learning what is real compassion and real mercy.

I hope you realize that these subtle organs of perception, the *latā'if*, in conjunction with this process of self-seeing, are invaluable companions. Seeing yourself through the eyes of others, seeing yourself in one situation that is then broadcast to the rest of the world, are the things that make you have *taqwa*, piety, and humility. What would make you humble? Something you are in awe of. If you are in awe of something, you are humbled by it. It could be a person or the sunset. If you go to the end of the driveway and watch the sun setting over the snow – it was pink today – how could you not appreciate the beauty and majesty of that? It would be impossible. If you are watching yourself and preparing yourself, when the opportunity comes knocking at your door, you are dressed to go out and play in the snow. You don't have to say, wait a minute, I have to get dressed. You are ready because you anticipated it. Why? You studied Sufism and become psychic? No, it is anticipated because it is very obvious.

Also, you should know that *qadam* doesn't only mean step. It means pace. It also means the different stages in one's thought process. “Watching your steps” also means watching your thoughts, watching how you think and what you think. When you make time during the day or night and reflect on things, and sit in *muraqabah*, then you will find that after you prepare yourself to sit and you are sitting, and you are making your intention, you are also doing something parallel to the Will of Allah. Allah tells us, if you

make time for Allah, Allah comes toward you and will be present. When you turn your attention to Qur'an or Hadith or the Sirah of Prophet Mohammed (sal) try to take them as applicable to now, to someone you know, to some circumstance you know. Make these things applicable to those [things you know].

Do you know what I mean when I say “applicable”? Your thoughts. It means watching the opportunities and circumstances, and looking at things that seem to be coincidences. You have to think, no, that's not a coincidence. That person was on my mind, and that non-local transmission went out, and circumstances came about so that person and I met. Or, I'm looking for opportunities. As I develop this watching of myself, of my steps, not only will I see opportunities for my work, but I know how to articulate them. I will know how to apply for that grant, and how to deal with that business situation. Watching your steps, or any of these Rules of the Order, are just tools to be used for a specific purpose. They are not an end in themselves, which I know, raises other questions which we won't get to tonight. You can bring them to me personally or raise them later.

You watch for opportunities, you seize the opportunity, and one of the signs is if it looks like a coincidence. I was thinking about my Aunt Dorothy a lot recently. She must be quite old now, in her eighties. A very beautiful, noble, and sophisticated woman. Incredibly loyal to my uncle, right up until his death. Very protective of him. But I'm embarrassed to contact her because after my uncle passed a couple of years ago, she moved down to Cary, North Carolina, in the Raleigh Durham area. It's only 2 hours and I haven't gone to see her. I don't feel good about it. We never saw each other a lot, but she had a profound influence on my life in one area.

When I was sixteen years old, I went to stay with her, as I did periodically in the summer. She had a big house on Long Island. Across the street was a girl. She sat me down and said, “If you are going to stay here, I want you to understand certain things. I run my house in a certain way. I prepare meals for my husband in a certain way. We do certain

things on certain days. There are times when you will be here alone. And I don't want you to disrupt my house at all, or do anything in my house that is not proper. So I'm telling you, and that's it. So don't disappoint me." That was it. When I was sixteen, she treated me like an adult.

I got this email from her today. She said, I was on your website, looking at the work you do. Happy holidays, how are Mitra and the girls? I wanted to write to her and tell her how sorry I was I didn't come to visit after the death of my uncle. I told her that once two years ago and still haven't gone to see her. But I decided I would not explain that again. I was watching my steps. I was not going to make excuses or cop a plea. I wrote back to her and said, thank you for looking at the site. I think of you often. Here are some pictures of the children. I hope you are well. And that's it. Now, you have to understand that even all these years, it goes against the bloodline [to not feel guilty]!

We have opportunities all the time to watch our steps. In this case, I acted but didn't try to be opportunistic and exploit her contact with me to express my upset with myself to her. If I had initiated the contact, I could have said, "I'm terribly embarrassed that I haven't contacted you in so long. Please forgive me. I'd like to come see you tomorrow." And now, as Allah has given me another reprieve as He always does, perhaps when the weather breaks.... I told her about the work we were doing. But I didn't say, "I'll try to see you when the weather breaks." Now I have the opportunity to say, "I'm free this week. Are you free? Can I come and see you?" That's not being opportunistic. That's watching your steps. There was action, but a portion of that action was inaction. Do you understand? I don't want to beat a dead horse.

You watch for opportunities and circumstances that seemingly are coincidental. (I was thinking about her and she wrote to me.) It means being alert and aware, being open to positive situations and impacts and forces, holding on to them and using them, but in a relaxed way. You look in a relaxed way, not a negative critical way. You say to yourself

a number of times, I'm going to act in such a way, and behave in such a way that I will hopefully prevent myself from making too many mistakes, but I'm not going to keep looking over my shoulder so I become paranoid. I'm going to watch what I'm doing and how I'm doing it, and be alert and prepared to seize the moment at the right time, *inshā'a-llāh*. It will be almost like you go to bed at night, and you didn't dream. You wake up in the morning after sleeping, but you are not aware that you were sleeping, only in retrospect. But you functioned in your sleep, and you slept. It's like that. [It happens] automatically, with no anxiety. You don't wake up and say, "I was sleeping last night. Oh, my God! I wonder what I missed. Better check my email."

Do you have any questions? There is an element of trust in this, by the way, too. We can talk about that sometime.

QUESTIONS

Student: According to the Rule of the Order, watching one's steps, it says, "Be always turned toward the journey and watch to recognize the importance of each step. The miracle of the way is found in watching." Is this rule particularly more important than the other rules in that sense?

Shaykh: No, they are all important. They all have their own qualities, but they are similar.

Student: In watching one's steps, is there an importance in watching them in terms of making progress? Is that implied in the part that says, "Watch to recognize the importance of each step."?

Shaykh: Yes, but it's more realizing that the watching is what gives it importance. [It is being] conscious [of what] you are doing or not doing, and understanding its context. [It is] making sure that your actions and thoughts are positive in such a continuous way that

it becomes natural for you to think and act (or not act) for positive reasons. It comes naturally for you. When that happens, that's the "miracle" of the way. The door is open for where ever you are or go, whatever circumstances you find yourself in or moving toward. In that sense, yes it is making progress, but it is not for progress. It is to watch that you do the things that reflect the highest levels of your character and capability, and not allow your ego to give yourself excuses for why you can't do something. There is always a solution.

You called me on the phone tonight, rightfully so, concerned about the weather and walking any distance, which is difficult for you at times and dangerous on the ice. I said, "Park next to my car." It seems like a simplistic thing, but it's not so simple. There is *adab* involved in it. You weren't seeing the way fully, clearly, how to accomplish your goal with the least amount of difficulty and danger, so you called me and I provided a way for you to contemplate doing it. This is in concert. You wouldn't have called up and said, "I can't come tonight unless I can part next to your car." You didn't call me hoping I would tell you to park next to my car. You called me to inform me, out of good *adab*, respectfully. Out of that came a solution. That's watching your steps. If you want to call that progress, fine. I'd be very careful calling it progress; because as soon as you are sure you've made progress, you're tested. If you are not up for a test, I'd just say, *alhamdulillah*, because the test always comes.

Student #2: Yes. How do you use this process of watching one's steps so that it is reflecting correctly what the truth is? (Shaykh: Can you ask it again?) What would be the best way for a student to link these observations (of the coincidences) together to reflect the higher truth rather than one's ego?

Shaykh: Positive, positive, positive! I used the word positive all the time. You are thinking exactly the wrong way. You are thinking, "I do this and that, and I make this mistake and that mistake. I'm worried I will screw up." That's contrary to everything

I'm talking about. Get out of it! It's totally contrary. You can't get yourself into this kind of trick bag where "watching your step" means you are watching everything that is wrong. That's what you do when you make *muhasabat*. You see what you did that was good and what wasn't good. You say, "*Astaghfiru-Llāh*" for the things that were not good and you try to change them. "Watching your steps" is not exactly that. It is with a positive intention and attitude you watch your actions and your inactions. You select the right actions, and the right time to pause and to act. You select the right time not to act, and the right time to act. *Muhasabat* is a practice you do. There is a connection between the two, but you must come to this with a positive attitude. Don't fall into this trap where you think, "Oh, I did this or that. Oh, I made a bad decision. Oh, I have to beat myself over the head for that." No, no. You have *muhasabat* for that.