

January 29, 2010

Khutbah



Title: [Tarbiya: A Means to Spiritual Knowledge](#)
Increasing the Value of Education

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Opening du'as. *Asalām aleikum*. Allah says in Qur'an:

Do you see the fire which you kindle. Is it you who produced the tree or are We the producer? We made it as a reminder for you and as a boon for the desert dweller. So glorify the Name of your Lord, the Immense. Thus I swear by the stations of the stars and truly that is a mighty oath. Truly this is a noble recital in a book kept hidden, which no one may touch but the pure.
(56:71-79)

If we had caused the Qur'an to descend upon a mountain, you would have seen it, humbled, split asunder in the dread of Allah. We set forth examples for people in order that they may reflect. (59:21)

My dear friends, brothers and sisters, these are very powerful statements about the weight of this text, of the secrecy, of the Truth of this Book, and of the meaning of Qur'an.

[They are powerful statements about] what is needed by us to really begin to understand the secrets within or the mysteries within, of the Qur'an, because even when it is in front of us, it remains hidden. Of course, we have been talking for many, many weeks, months on means. I spoke just last weekend in Charlottesville on sincerity and how to unlock the door or lift the veils that hide the Haqq of Allah, the Haqq that is Allah.

The idea is not to just increase our knowledge. The idea is to gain something of value that we can use. I guess we can say that life can be wonderful but what you get from spirituality is value added. To increase our knowledge means that we have to be realistic and that our *'aqīda*, our behavior, our character has to be right and good. Our knowledge is something that needs the right environment to grow in and the right nutrients to sustain its growth.

As we approach the talk for February in Charlottesville, which will be on *tarbiya*, I want to speak a little about *tarbiya* today. The root comes from the same word *rabat*. It means to increase or to group together. We have to increase our knowledge and to link one aspect of our knowledge to another aspect of our knowledge, so that we can use it for benefit. Just think what it would be like if we had to start all over again with every subject. I know about finances, but I cannot take any knowledge I have about finances to housekeeping. Or let's say I know about cross-cultural relations, but I cannot take any of that knowledge to deal with conflict resolution in our work.

Knowledge is not information. *Tarbiya* is usually translated as education or to educate ourselves and to educate means to return to the source of knowledge and to understand the links between everything in Allah's creation. Or another way of saying that is to see the Divine Presence, which is the link. In this way, each generation or each iteration of our knowledge base, there is an excess. It exceeds the previous one. This word, *rabat*, from which the word *tarbiya* comes, means to grow up, to exceed to more than it was before. Also the implication is that not only do we learn, but we teach others. That is our duty: to spread our knowledge, to increase the knowledge of others. In increasing the knowledge of others, we exceed the knowledge base as it existed before. But it is to teach them in a way that is consistent with what is in this text (Qur'an), in this revelation, in these words, in this knowledge base.

To increase may also have a negative tendency. We find in Arabic that something that has its positive side also has its negative side, so we can understand where its balance point is. Where does it go from positive to negative. If you increase your wealth in such a way as to leave others at a disadvantage, in the sense of interest, this is *riba*. It comes from the same root as *tarbiya*, which means to educate. *Riba* is the concept of earning something unjustly for no effort on your part, without taking on some of the risk, some of the labor yourself.

Tarbiya means to educate one self and to engage one self fully in the process of learning. It means literally education, but it has yet another important meaning to it. As we engage with Qur'an, as we unveil the secrets of Qur'an, as we see Qur'an to be something in this day and age as being alive in the moment that applies to the issues that we deal with on a day to day basis, then it has meaning to us and it has an answer for us. It gives us a means to find answers that we do not have yet for something that we require answers for. The Qur'an says, "do this" and you will find the answer to the *sirata-l-mustaqim*, the straight way.

As if that would be enough, it is not enough because *tarbiya* has another meaning and that is an attitudinal meaning. In the attitudinal form, *tarbiya* means breeding and upbringing. Our upbringing stays with us and never leaves us. We are back to that subject of history, culture. If we are clear, we have to totally adjust ourselves. We may come from an upbringing that is not good, or we may have to reach back from an upbringing that was not good, or we may have to reach back in our upbringing to take all that goodness and sincerity from it, because it stays with us. *Tarbiya* also means upbringing, breeding. How were we brought up? What are the values? What is the character that comes from that upbringing? We say: This idea was bred into someone.

How do we create community from these diverse upbringings? Well, the answer lies in the education. [It lies] in the way we have been educated to use that history or dismiss some of it, to look at our conditioning, to look at our cultural and personal makeup, and

to take knowledge from that, to take knowledge from the foundational sources of Qur'an, to take knowledge from others, and to see what adjustments have to be made. How we create the basis for education, how we create the basis for understanding the Truth, how we extract the nectar from the Truth of the Qur'an and how we apply it to the day to day life—this is the process, but it also has an attitude.

A *murabbin* is an educator who takes the process of *tarbiya* and now passes it on. That is an attitude, that is a commitment. There has to be a certain kind of behavior that goes along with it. The *akhlaq* and the *'aqīda* have to be correct for the transmission of that knowledge to take place properly. How is it correct. It means you are doing it *fī sabīl-llāh*. It means that you are doing it humbly. It means that you are always gaining and passing on. It is the joy of learning something new. It is the constant transmission. [It is like] you are sending e-mails out all the time to yourself, citations, a url. “I came across this which led me to that which led me to that. And by the way, I know that you are interested in that so I am going to tell you about that.” “Oh yeah, and I was following that and I will send it back to you.” It is an exchange of knowledge, in this case, not just information.

How we learn and how we pass on what we learn has to do with our own presence, our own attitude, our own sense of history, our own sense of culture, our status, our lineage, our attitude, the attitude we have in our own mind about our own self, how we make decisions, how we see ourselves in situations, how we make decisions and communicate with others, how we see others in relationship to the Truth or knowledge that we are trying to pass on—in other words, [our relationship] to Allah. [It has to do with] our attitude, our presence establishes our status, our sense of placement in the historical reality of life and in our lineage.

We have the biological lineage and we have the spiritual lineage. If our biological lineage and our environmental circumstances created, released or opened the doorway to

the interest in the spiritual realm, now we find all these relatives that we did not have before. They are not my father's brother, or sister or my mother's brother or sister. They are not my aunt or uncle in blood. They are my relatives in the spiritual lineage, in the *silsila*. Sometimes we are closer to them because we are bound by common interest and common love. We have to cull out what is best and provide the means for what is best to continue and that is what we do, of course, in a biological sense, in breeding, if you want to get Darwinian. We breed the best qualities into plants or into animals if we are farming those, so that the lineage continues as a healthy stock. But this is also the idea of the culture in community and in *tarīqah*.

You try to give the best impetus, the best guidance, the best education in the school, in the community, in the home schooling that everyone has at home and in this *masjid*, so that we can breathe into future generations a better sensitivity to the truth, so the DNA, if you will, is affected. If you want to read the article that I found recently, I am happy to give it to you on the subject of what I talked to Dr. Salk about over two decades ago. Right attitudes and good judgment, piety and love, submission and trust are all elements that are affected in this process of education. You can, as many people do in different parts of the world, just stick children into a school and talk at them and talk at them and talk at them, and hit them with a stick if they don't listen. Or you can inspire them, help their creativity, understand that character and the potential of a human being.

It is just like in the spiritual life. We may not have grown up Muslims; we may not have grown up in a Sufic family (as most of us didn't), so we have to learn a new way. Some of us grew up with an education that was very didactic. Then we have to learn a new way, an experiential way. Some people, like me, went on to study Montessori and other things because we knew that there was something more to this, something different. We watch where our defaults are and we correct ourselves. It is the same thing in our spiritual journey. We have to take advantage of what is being given to us, being transmitted to us. You [want to try and] create future generations of people who have an

inborn sense of what the Truth is; an inborn sense of their culture, their community and their respect; an inborn sense of their responsibility and their duty to their history, to their family and to the world through that.

You can't skip over the other two just to get to "serve the world" part. You *can*.

Truly this is noble Reading and a hidden Book. Nobody may touch it except the pure.

Well, anybody can touch the Book. The pure and the impure can touch the Book. What does it mean? You can't touch the meaning. You cannot extract the meaning of the Book [or the service].

We are creating future generations every day, and hopefully with the right attitudes. We learn from our errors and our mistakes. We learn that we could have done this better or that better. We should have said this to our children or that to our children. We should have been stronger not weaker. We should not have empowered them when they weren't ready to be empowered. We should have guided them in a better way. We should have spoken more directly to our brothers and sisters, with love and respect and with humility. We should speak to a person in a language they can understand. We have all those informational knowledge, but we have to put it to use. Everyone one of those things takes reflection, humility and confidence that what we are doing is the right thing. At the same time, we cannot assume that our children or we grow in this kind of environment with no brains. Everybody has responsibility. We may not want to face those responsibilities, but we have them. We have them.

You can say, "I can be anything." "I can do anything" "I can live anywhere" "I can think of whatever I want, I am a free individual," but nobody is totally a free individual, are they? If you just take some time to educate yourself to your spiritual responsibility,

as well as to your material responsibilities, then you realize that Allah has made it so that in fact all these things can be aggregated. I told this story the other night about this restaurant in Mononghela, Pa. I will give an example. I gave this example to somebody, about choosing careers that allow you to do anything anywhere. If you choose to be President of the United States, you have to live in Washington. And Obama hates Washington. He wants to get out. He can't stand it. His life has changed for the rest of his life. He will have Secret Service protection. He will not be able to just go out to a restaurant, for the rest of his life. How is that for an ego trip?

Many years ago, my father, who was in the iron and steel business (my mother ironed, my father stole - an old Pittsburgh joke!). He was a steel broker, which means that you have no use. In order to get business, he had to buy the overrun from the steel companies. They always had overruns, an extra twenty-five bars of this or that. He would have to compete with other people to get those, and then resell them to someone who needed them. So he had to develop relationships with the fellow who is in charge of buying and selling. To develop those relationships, he would take them out to dinner. Of course. One of the things that you did was to take a client out once a week. One man who knew how to take good advantage of my father, would go out to dinner with him. Sometimes they would go to this restaurant in Mononghela, Pennsylvania.

Mononghela, Pennsylvania is exactly what it sounds like. It is a mill town on the Mononghela River. All there were in those days were steel mills spitting out fire, gases—noisy, dirty place. They would go to this restaurant which was a French haute cuisine restaurant in Mononghela, Pa. It only sat about 17 people. This man from Mononghela, Pa, went to Paris, or where ever, learned how to be a chef, and opened a restaurant in Mononghela, Pa., which is 25 miles from anything that resembles a real city and 50 miles from anything that is a real city. In those days, to feed four people, you would also have wine and booze with the meal. In that restaurant, you were presented with two entrees, maybe two soups and he would decide the rest of the dinner. It would

be three to four hours there. You would drive 60 miles; you would spend three to four hours, and it is costing you, in 1958, \$25.00 a person, which is at least \$100 a person today—a four hundred dollar meal for four people in Mononghela, Pa. What is my point?

This fellow was successful with a 20 person restaurant in Mononghela, Pa. He could have had a 100 seat restaurant in Pittsburgh, a 50 seat restaurant in (some other town), but he was successful. What is my point? If we have the right intention and the right attitude, you can find fulfillment wherever you need to be. The different between information and knowledge, the different between educating for the future and understanding responsibility, and just educating for material success is a big difference. There is a difference between *baraka* and *tarbiya*. *Baraka* means that one feels the blessings of a place, or a situation, or an individual. *Tarbiya* means that one understands where it comes from and has a deep realization or understanding of that lineage to which the *baraka* comes: from the Qur'an to this very moment, from me to my *murīds*, and you to each other.

Whether it is in a community or a nation, the rise and fall of a nation starts from the heart of the people, the way they approach the Truth and the choices they make. “Oh, I am making a little choice. It does not affect anybody. Just me.” It’s like: “My vote doesn’t count for anything. What is one vote?” We’ve seen it in the past few elections of how 18 votes can swing an election or two hundred votes can swing an election. Every vote counts, we say; every choice counts. Whether a community or a nation, its success, its rise or fall starts in the hearts of the people, and in the way the people approach their responsibility, the way they use their knowledge, the way they use their education. The purpose for which they were educated was not just to give them information, or to guarantee that they would get a \$150,000 job. There is social and personal responsibility with that, national responsibility, community responsibility, familial responsibility. You

cannot turn away from that because if you do, you are alone, even if you are surrounded. This is not ‘solitude amidst the crowd’ that I am talking about.

Yet, at the same time, a person’s belief or creed its foundation is limitless in its power. That means you can use it for anything and gain anything you want; hence, the battle with the *nafs*, the wrestling with Shaytan. The Whisperer whispers. What the Whisperer whispers are not ugly things in your ear. If you go to the restaurant in Mononghela, Pa. and if you have a bad meal that costs you \$100 a person/equivalent, you are not going to go back. Shaytan only gives you what is delicious and what you think you want. Shaytan does not even say, “You only have a choice of an entrée and an appetizer.” He is going to say, “What would you like? You would like that? Well, of course.” “Would you like that? Oh, wonderful!” “You trust me? Thank you. But I really want you to choose.” “You choose” – that is the mantra, if you don’t mind my using that term, of the past 50 years.

The Holy Prophet (sal) said, ***“If a man is determined to possess more and beyond the throne, beyond creation, he will have it.”*** In other words, there is no obstacle that he can resist in the long run. The spiritual energy, based in a firm foundation, is the Truth, is the Haqq. But in the same way, if a person is determined to possess more and more of this world, he shall have it, but there will be nothing in the Hereafter. In our daily life, we imagine that we only deal with concrete situations. In our daily life, we think that we are only dealing with problems. In reality, we move in this huge, huge ocean of abstractions. We even do that to the point that physicists recognize that they are unable to put some sort of demarcation line between consciousness and unconsciousness, between what is concrete and what is abstract. Where does it begin?

It is obvious that a house does not go up without first being an abstract idea in the mind of some architect, designer or dweller. The external realizations that come about before taking their respective material shape are a result of an elaborate set of concepts that are

tried and discarded, tried and discarded, until you take some of those discarded ones and match them up with some of the other discarded ones and say, “Well, you know we threw this idea out before, but in light of this idea, we could put these two things together and we could put together something that fits, that works.” The fact is that what transforms us is what educates us. What transforms us is our nearness to Allah, that is, awareness, to know that we are in the Presence, that Allah is present beside us. That transforming power of our own history, our lineage, our *silsila* has always sprung up from the ever forming source of Truth, of belief, of creed.

The scientific attitude of someone who sits in a laboratory is one thing, but without being able to demonstrate what their postulating, what good is it? The work in the laboratory has to be based on what your theory is, what you are postulating, what you are searching for. Even just to search, you have to have some framework of what you are searching for. If you go into the laboratory, to mix a bunch of stuff together, and try a bunch of different experiments; if you don’t know what you are going to find, but you just find something and then try and describe what you find, this may be great fun, like tinker toy time, but you are not going to find anything. It is like putting 100 monkeys at computers; eventually, they will type something that will make sense.

The idea of the laboratory itself is to take the idea and test out the thesis or postulation. A human being conducts his or her affairs of day to day life. In that conducting of it, it requires *iman*. It requires *islam*/submission and love, and an organized system of belief or principle that stands at a starting point of knowledge, a starting point of action, which when you approach it correctly, reveals more and more to you. The conception of our existence and of our needs, desires, hopes, duties and rights is by nature one that should be universal, and connected to our emotional nature, our spiritual nature, our intellectual nature and our physical state.

But the things of this temporal life, and the belief of things in the Hereafter, or in intellectual processes are limited. When we think of our existence as connected to all of these things, we think about our bodies and beliefs, and we act. “Oh, I’m sick.” I am acting and I have to do something. “I *believe* this Tylenol will help me. I *believe* the Homeopathy is going to help me.” Or “I am emotionally upset. I have to talk to somebody. I *believe* that talking to somebody will help me.” “I have an idea. I am going to talk it over with Musa. That is going to help me.” I have a belief. We respond automatically. That is what feeds us.

Sometimes we get indigestion. We eat too much or we eat the wrong thing. Knowledge tells us, “Don’t eat all that sugar.” “But I like it! I don’t have diabetes yet, so what am I worried about.” You can go to the point where you can say, “They have good cures for diabetes now.” So we get indigestion from just eating. *Tarbiya* is not that. *Tarbiya* is to take and increase the value, not to do something that has no risk, not to do something that has no responsibility. Education carries with it responsibility, not just responsibility for that little thing that you know. “I’m an engineer. I am responsible that the bridge meets the bridge.” It is not just that. If it was, there would be no alumni association. “You have responsibility in our eyes to help us to continue to give other people the great education we gave you.” What about to the parents? What about to the community? What about to the *dīn* that is the basis of all those commitments, all those sacrifices, all of that love, all of that generosity, all of that volunteerism, and all of the things that give you the foundation and quality of your life?

Some of us discovered [that *dīn*] along the way, because we were not brought up that way, like some of the children sitting here. Mostly, we weren’t brought up that way. Maybe a little here and there. His father was an activist lawyer, so he got it from that that. My father was a historian, my mother was this. But it is sort of catch as you catch can in a society that was always against that. But then you created a reality that we walk in called “this community” or your family, which still has a lot of changing to do and a

lot of growing to do and a lot of organizing to have done and a lot of *muhatabah* to be done. Beautiful metaphor or truth—accounting. Yet, [people say], “I’ll account for myself tomorrow, or at the end of the day.” “I spent 16 hours working and making decisions, etc., some right, some wrong, some good, some bad, with an attitude like this and words like that, and my character being this way, and my voice being that way. I will take 10 seconds at the end of the day to make *muhatabah*.” Sixteen hours and I will give myself two minutes, maybe three; or mañana, tomorrow. Something’s not right.

We are unfair to ourselves. We don’t trust ourselves. We don’t trust ourselves by saying, “I’m an individual, and I will make my own decisions.” That’s not a trusting state. We don’t trust Allah. We don’t believe Allah is walking next to us. Allah is the ocean we are living in. It’s like me saying to you that you don’t trust your breath, the air, the oxygen. You would have to keep telling yourself, “Breathe, breathe, breathe.” “Trust that oxygen. Trust the air.” You need the air to say that with! We don’t say trust Allah, trust the *shuyukh*, trust the *ambiyā*, trust the Prophet (sal). No, no, no – I trust me!

The conception of our existence, needs, desires, hopes and duties is by nature one that is universal and connected to our emotional and spiritual nature and intellect. We think about our bodies and beliefs, but we don’t think about them in the right way, often. We respond to them, and that’s what’s feeding us. But all these things are formed by knowledge, and mostly knowledge of the external lives we lead. Then there is the inherent sense in our soul that we are responding to. [We have an inherent sense of] the role of a Muslim, a Sufi, to bring some of that inherent knowledge to a state of consciousness so that we can use it to realize what the potential is we have ourselves, and also to prepare us for the Hereafter.

The crucial problem I have been talking about is not to question the validity or the basis of our faith/*iman*. We shouldn’t question our faith so much, or the necessity to have a belief system so much. We have a creed, a belief. The most urgent failing of humankind

today is that people don't know the difference between what is true and what is false, what is good and what is bad, what has good consequences and what has bad consequences. Just look at the state of the world we are living in today. People don't know the value of a faith or a creed. They just follow it, follow it, follow it; and where it's inconvenient, they don't follow it, don't follow it, don't follow it, don't question it, don't question it... question it, question it, question it.

The freedom to choose lies in belief and lies in Islam, and the choice to not choose is also in Islam. We have to admit that we can't live in a world of ignorance. We can't ignore what we are facing in day to day life. We try to; we dance around things, but we can't ignore what is facing us. Therefore, the only way to deal with it is to educate ourselves properly, and take the education we have and use it responsibly and properly. Don't think we are going to remake the world. I heard Melinda Gates on the radio today. They will put 10 million dollars toward vaccinations. *Alhamdulillah!* Someone recognizes what needs to be done. And [M. Gates also said], "No, we are not leaving money to our children. We are bringing up our children to understand [responsibility]. We are taking them to see poverty, and to understand that everyone has a responsibility. A hundred years from now, I'm not going to be around. Whoever the philanthropists are then will have to deal what is happening then. We want to do it now. We tell our children there is nothing more valuable than humility and education. And they understand it to whatever degree they understand it right now." She is a very articulate woman.

It's fine to vaccinate all the people in the world, but if they live, you got a problem. You have to feed them, and some way of getting the food. And they have to work; otherwise, you will have a bunch of vaccinated people who will starve to death. Don't you also have to address poverty, food security and civil society also? Maybe they feel someone else is doing that. It's that linkage of knowledge that is very important. A billion vaccinated people are not necessarily going to be a billion people who are able to eat. They are not going to die of malaria, pneumonia, or tuberculosis; they will die of

starvation. Do we have to wait for 10 million of them to die in order for the Gates' to decide that, "Oh, well, wait a minute. We'd better take the next step for this." Maybe they are. I haven't looked at their website for a while. I'm positive they are doing some of their work, but I know that public health is their main focus.

That's why I raised the issue with Harold Robles about the relationship between HIV/AIDS and food security and poverty, which is a conversation I hope to have with Desmond Tutu next month. Education is responsibility. Instead of paying interest out for nothing, you gain value by expanding your understanding and view of education. Our children grow up with a responsibility for the world they are living in. They have a responsibility for the other human beings in this world, and not just human beings. This is *tarbiya*. We have to educate ourselves with a sense and attitude of that Divine Presence. We have to educate ourselves with nobility. We have to have the status in our minds and hearts of who we are, uniquely who we are, as an individual, Sufi, Muslim, human being.

This is *tarbiya*, and it comes from Qur'an, which comes from Allah, Who is present. It comes because what we see with our eyes has a lesson in it. Poverty has a lesson, wealth has a lesson. Compassion has a lesson; avenging has a lesson. Hate has a lesson; love has a lesson. Allah is pointing: look here. We're walking, we're walking through life. This *tarbiya* that speaks to our heart; that is to say, if we truly educate ourselves, our heart opens. Don't be afraid of your heart opening. Don't be afraid of responsibility. Don't be afraid of *mahasabah*. Don't be afraid to review how we do things, why we do things, what we do, how best to do them. Be open. Our faith will become stronger.

It's not just a technical education. You learn that too: *fiqh, tariqah, sunnah, alhamdulillah*. But this is educating our souls that I'm talking about—diving deep. We have to understand that our faith corresponds to *iman*, in the sense that our '*aqīda* and belief system has to be reflected in the way we live our lives and make our decisions, even if it

takes many years, and we have to say a lot of *astaghfiru-Llāhs*. “I should be doing in this way; I don’t. I know better; I have to change.” It’s better to know that you are among people, your husband, your wife, your brother, your sister, friend, neighbor, fellow member of *tarīqah* who understands and says, “Yes, me too.” That’s real education, and that’s the attitude that comes along with *tarbiya*. *Asalāmu aleikum*.

Duas. SECOND KHUTBA. Duas.

Citations: 59:21; 56: 71-80; 3:103