

June 12, 2010

Saturday



Title: [Gauging Progress on The Path](#)

DVD title: Progress on the Path:
The Subtleties of Change and Development

Dinner blessing: O Allah, we are grateful for the blessings You give us, for the blessings of our garden, for the blessings of our family and our community, our friends. We ask You, Allah, to send your blessings and mercy upon all those who are in need, here in the community and those who are ill, and those who we know and those whose hearts are open to your rewarding blessings. Allah, this is the beginning of the week where we become quite busy, and we ask that You give us strength and stamina, deep appreciation and humility, and more and more opportunity to serve You, and to realize the blessing of that service, to understand that spiritual awakening comes through love and through service. Give safety to those who are traveling, both in their going and in their coming. *Amin.*

Suhbat: *Bismi-Llāhi-r-Rahmāni-r-Rahīm.* I want to speak again on something I spoke about recently. Allah (swt) says in Qur'an:

And those who came after them say, “O Lord forgive us, and our brethren who came before us into the faith. And leave not in our hearts rancor or a sense of injury against those who have believed. Our Lord, You are indeed full of Kindness and You are the Most Merciful.”

Unfortunately, we see rancor in the hearts of people. Every day the news is worse. On occasion, we even find some rancor in our own hearts. I think there are very few of us who can say there are no seeds of anger, angst, or upset in our own hearts. At the same

time, I think that it's hard to make progress if you don't know how to see your progress. After a period of time, we feel that maybe we are not making progress on the spiritual journey; and we don't know exactly what it means.

Especially those of us who practice with the *latā'if*, we forget what it means, that it is a subtlety. Like most people, however we are today, we think that is the way we have been for years. We don't observe ourselves very well, and consequently we don't think we make much progress on the spiritual path. But others see us, and certainly if we had the humility and the patience, I'm sure we would all see our progress. But as we get older and spend more time on this journey, we start looking at it in terms of time instead of the subtleties of change and development. I guess I should say this is a subtle point about subtlety. You start looking in terms of time, as if time is a great measurement of something. We tend not to look at our own attitude.

When we began this path, we probably had no idea who we were anyway. We probably didn't have any real sense of what our hopes and aspirations were, except in general terms. We are not like yogis who talk about self-realization or enlightenment. We understand that whatever comes to us is a gift of Allah. [But it is] as if we are supposed to have some kind of epiphany every third day, then every second day, then every day to prove that we made some kind of progress. We don't look at the obvious, for example, what has been built here on this property. We don't look at the lives we have touched all over the world. And many of us find it very difficult to remember the way we were when we started on this journey.

Very few of us are good measurers, calculators of our own selfishness, or our own egos, or our own defensiveness. Then as you make progress, it's very subtle. Yesterday, we took a walk as a family. We were looking at the mimosa tree in Neelam's yard, and Sabreen went to pick a mimosa flower. She noted that the leaves were closed because it was getting toward night. You can stand there and stare at it, and you will never see the

leaves close. It goes so slowly, your brain cannot perceive that speed. You could take photos of it in time lapse, and you will see it close, but you will never see it close—just in different stages of closed. That’s a good metaphor for us, because we don’t see our change and our progress. But it’s there.

You could see it if you looked around and said, “I helped to create all this,” or “[I helped] educate the children.” Unfortunately over time, we become so good at forgetting where we began, that we have this crazy idea that this is the way I’ve always been. Now, if you concentrate on patience, for example, compassion or tolerance, maybe you get a better idea. If you know that you came into this path with a lot of anger, and you are now sitting with the ability not to be driven or controlled by your anger anymore, then maybe you get a better idea. You can concentrate or focus on one aspect of your character that you notice some change in. What we forget is that the practices we do, the sincerity with which we do them, the community we live in, the *suhbat* which we participate in, are not like a targeted antibiotic. It doesn’t just cure one thing. It affects everything. You may notice it if in your anger or impatience, but everything has changed.

The question comes what is it you expected? What did you want? After thirty years, did you expect to be Jesus Christ or Prophet Muhammed? Is that who you expected to be? Did you expect to be some high-ranking *shuyukh*? What did you expect? You should just expect to be a good, dedicated, devoted person trying to live a spiritually full life, refining yourself every day. Every day we live in the world and every day we get dirty, and so every day we have to bathe, to shower. You become more expert at your work. Maybe you became more involved in some topic that you enjoy. You brought your skills to something in a better way. You became a more reliable spiritual person so people rely on your insight and your opinion. What are you measuring your contentment or discontentment against? Is it against some time frame, something in a book, or the fact that the *shaykh* said that you should be further along than this after all these years of meditation?

If we can't sit down and say, "I made my fullest effort. I did everything according to the time table. I dove deeply," then we have no reason to complain about anything. We have no reason to kill the messenger or the message. There is nothing in the contract between Allah and His creation that says that "Despite yourself, I am going to uplift you. So live whatever life you want to live. Be as selfish as you want to be or as selfless as you want to be, and don't worry. I will take care of it all in the end." That is not what the contract says. The contract says, "**Remember Me and I will remember you.**" How can we criticize or complain about (and I will go out on a limb and say), even question things we have not put our full effort, our knowledge, and our capability to? But we do because we are human beings. It is not hypocrisy, because there is no self-aggrandizement in it. But it is also not spirituality, and it is not humility, and it is not honest. I am afraid we index a lot of things against time like we index everything against oil, and we see what that has brought, economically. It is problematic.

There are models for us, models of the *shuyukh*, the model of Prophet Muhammed (sal). We have to be honest about looking at those models. It is not just comparing ourselves, so we can be critical of ourselves. A model can also be a template. A model is something that you try to copy. Just because we see to some degree the way we could be, seeing is not enough. We have to make the effort. Effort is not just the amount of time you spend. You can be sincere but underneath it all, you can always be questioning, questioning, questioning with the mind. The mind is always asking, "Well, is it this way or that way." It is comparing this *shaykh* with that *shaykh* or that person with this person or this teaching with that teaching—always comparing and keeping an arm's length distance from full engagement.

So what is going to happen after 20 or 30 years? You are still going to be at arm's length. You are going to have gained a lot of information, but you are still going to be at arm's length. You will not be engaged, because you have not submitted. You have not

trusted the process. I will not go on my periodic rant about how we submit every day to so many things, but we will not submit to the journey, to the spiritual path, to the guidance. We would rather submit to an unknown, drunk pilot on a United Airlines plane. We don't question him or the taxi driver or what is going on in the kitchen in the restaurant where we are eating, but we question everything else. We question every little detail of the spiritual path, as if we don't want to succeed. We would rather hold onto our apparent intellectual freedom to question everything, but commit to very little. We would rather hold onto that than to succeed.

And success is what? Success is those subtle changes that we have in ourselves. No one is content all the time. No one is successful all the time, but success accrues, accumulates. Just as you hold people in your mind; you have known them for five, ten or fifteen years and you hold that image in your mind and you don't let them change. When they change, you don't see the change. You don't accept it so easily. You continue to see them this way or that way. The other part of it is that when you are living and working in a *tekkia*, a *khanaqah*, like this, where everyone is making some kind of an effort, where the overall *akhlaq* is at a very high level, where people are striving, whatever faults there are, they are going to stick out. They are going to be very, very obvious. Just like a black dot is obvious against a white piece of paper.

When you are living in the gray world of gray people, you don't see that so much. You see only the egregious behavior. You shouldn't assume that what you see as a fault in someone on the spiritual journey is egregious just because you see it. The egregious behavior is what you see out in the world of people who are not on any kind of spiritual journey—the hypocrisy, the lies, the selfishness, and the greed. If you see a little bit of anger or a little bit of selfishness, if you see a little bit of fear or a little bit of doubt in an atmosphere like this, it seems like a lot. But it is nothing compared to the outside.

Indeed, often, what happens, is a person comes to that point where they are about to step into another *maqam*, and all kinds of forces seem to line up against it. Doubts come; fears come and time comes. That is when you have to just say, “This is my life. This is the way. This is what I choose and I have been chosen. I have been chosen and I accept.” Remember that from *ba’iat*? I choose and I accept. That is it. That’s it. It is not going to be better in Rome. It is not going to be better in Athens. It is not going to be better on the moon. It is not going to change if you get a new car. It is not going to change if you get a boat, a new car. It is what it is. If you settle into that, you become like the simple people, like the *fuqara*.

The simple people may not seem very spiritual, and may not even call themselves spiritual. Simple people are content with the simple life. They are content. In this world that we live in today, among all of us well-educated people, contentment is a very, very expensive item. We go from store to store looking for it—literally. We look for happiness in products. We look for happiness in jobs. We look for happiness in status. Then you can compare what we do. We have a wonderful product. We work at wonderful jobs, most of us. The status we get for it is appreciation from people who are recipients. Today, I received a letter from Sarah from Oman saying that “the most important experience from this program was the hospitality and the respect that was given to us by the people of Legacy. I have been on other State Department programs, and there is nothing compared to what I got.”

Well, of course! But we don’t appreciate that in ourselves. It is good to have a stranger come from another country half way around the world and tell us that, *alhamdulillah*. It is an affirmation, a testimony. But we don’t think about that ourselves. What is progress? Progress is reflective. You see your progress reflected in other people in their appreciation. You also see your progress when you find resistance in your own self, and you see it as resistance, and you label it as resistance, and then you deal with it. You say, “I am not happy with that part of my character.” You want it to change. When it

changes, you probably won't see it for a very long time. Beware of the generalizations (or the specific statements) about progress, because I guarantee you that you don't see it. Others will see it, but you don't see it, usually. If you do see it, you see it for fleeting moments. Then you go back to your psychological stupor for a while. Be fair.

The worst thing is when you say, "Yeah. I know that. I've heard all of that before. Ya Shaykh, you have said that before." There is nothing I have not said before. I make my living saying things that I have said before. Listen to it. Hear it. There is no one question that there is no answer to. That is not the issue. The question is, "Do you want to hear the answer?" Then the educated person says, "It is probably me. I am not listening and it is probably me, and I am to blame." But there is no sincerity in that. You say one thing, but you don't really believe it. You believe it is a bad match. We are out of sync. We are not in the right place at the right time. Sure you are. Allah is here. So how could you be in the wrong place? Isn't Allah present? It is your mentality.

Our heart is designed to be free. Our heart is able to exist free of disturbances and rancor, free of jealousy and anger and doubt. It is designed for that. It does not mean, however, that you can't have rancor, jealousy, anger and fear in your heart. It means that you are not optimizing the design. You are not using the tool in the right way. It is like trying to take a screw out of a piece of wood with a hammer. You could do it. You could beat the wood to pieces until the screw falls out.

We can accommodate very subtle feelings and very subtle insights. That is what we should be striving for. We should not be striving for some sort of illumination, some epiphany. We should be striving just to see things in a more and more subtle way. We should be discontent with our discontent. We should doubt that our doubt is necessary. We should fear the fear itself and trust in Allah. We should understand that all good fortunes, all good things come to human beings (not just to us) as favors of Allah, as the *fadl, nai'ma* of Allah. The gifts that Allah bestows on us, we should accept as gifts from

Allah. Not Allah as some distant God off on a throne somewhere, but Allah in the presence. The bounty that comes to us at our meals is from Allah, because it is Allah. The compassion that comes at the times that we most need compassion, that is because Allah is present. And we should say that: “Hello. I am glad to see you!” We should say it, “*Alhamdulillah.*” That should remind us of Allah, and Allah is that—*dhat*.

How long does it take? Two seconds, three seconds to remember? It may take you years to train yourself to do that. It shouldn't, but it might take you years to train yourself to recognize that all of this comes from Allah. But to just affirm it, takes, what two seconds, three seconds? Think of how many two-second-blocks-of-time you have wasted in your life. Think of how many useless things you have done for an hour, a day, a week or a month, and have been totally distracted. All that is required is to remember for a few seconds. It is what we call the *waqufi qalbi*. I shiver to think how much time I have wasted in my life. I don't know. “May Allah pardon the sins of these people. Help them, O Allah.” Don't even say, ‘help me.’ Say ‘help them.’ “Give me the means to help them.”

If you have the means to help someone who needs compassion, what do you have? Compassion. So where is Allah? Allah is present within you in that moment. You should remember that the Prophet Muhammed (sal) said, “***O Allah. If you are a Forgiver, then forgive the sins of all the creatures. No slave of Yours will be in difficulty.***” Not just “Allah forgive me.” “Forgive all the sins of all Your creatures.” That was what the Prophet prayed for. How long did it take to say that? Three seconds? All I have to do is add sincerity to it. I have a real potent remedy. We wrap ourselves up in the ‘shoulds’ and the ‘woulds.’ “I should have done that.” “This would have happened if I had...” It is a fatal disease. You go through life and you think, “Oh my gosh. I am getting older. I don't know if I have been on the spiritual path in the right way. It is probably me, but I don't know what progress I made.” Take a step back. Try to remember who you were.

I asked you to write your history. Why did I ask you to write your history? It was not to figure out why you are miserable right now. I asked you to write your history so that you could take a step back and look. Try to capture where you were at the beginning of this journey. Try to be honest about where you were, but what you were and what you are today, what you know, what you knew then and what you know today, even just what you know intellectually about Islam or Sufism. “Ah, religion.” We call it a religion, but it is not a religion. The Prophet himself said, “***I have not come to make a new religion.***” It is your character. It is attributes. It is quality. It is process. It is not a thing. So if you don’t like religion, don’t worry about it. It does not have anything to do with Islam, because Islam is not a thing. It is a process. It is a way of living. It is a way of reaping the best out of yourself.

Every day that you fail and you know it, you are making *dhikr*. That is *dhikr*. We may all have the fatal disease called life. Life is a fatal disease. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t die of it. We all may have this fatal disease, but there are worse diseases—the disease of anger, jealousy, doubt and all of that. Some people like to keep themselves in that state. It is not that you like it; it is that you are habituated to it. You don’t know what is going to come next. You don’t know what is on the other side, so at least you are familiar with misery. You are familiar with doubt, familiar with anger. It is like an old friend. “Ah, my old friend, there you are—anger. If I didn’t have anger, I don’t know what I would have.”

There is an internal cure for this disease, and that is when you pay attention to your heart. You realize that that heart can be polished and be reflective, and you can find life is rewarding. It is actually cool. Actually, the Prophet called it neat. ***The Messenger of Allah was asked, “Which people are great in virtue.” The Prophet (sal) replied, “One whose heart is neat, whose heart is clean and whose tongue is truthful.” Then he was asked, “We are aware of the truthful tongue, but what is the meaning of a neat and***

clean heart?” His answer was, “One who fears Allah is free of evil. His heart is clean and there is no sin in it, neither insubordination, jealousy or rancor.” That’s neat.

So we have to base this journey that we have been on for five years or ten years or twenty years or thirty years or forty years on something that is totally removed from our own selfishness. It has to be based on love—love and mutual affection. “I love you but I don’t know if I love the path. I love you but I don’t know if I love Allah.” It is the same thing. Love is love. Dive into the love.

You will love the path. You will love Allah. You will love the practices. You will love the work. You will love the reflection of yourself, even if you are in an ugly, grumpy mood, because you will be realizing that it is in that love that you will find that peace and happiness. Nobody wants to be outside the protection of Allah, even the agnostics. They are very careful about that, just in case they may be wrong. When the quarrels intensify, when the doubts intensify, when the worries intensify, when the obsession with life and death, years and time intensify, the roots of those difficulties go very deep. We have to tend to our life properly. We have to weed the garden. If we don’t weed the garden, the crop will not be very good. All, or at least some, of that time and effort we put into it is going to be wasted.

It is the same thing; we have to weed our own garden. We have to be sympathetic. We have to fertilize it with our practice. We have to be soft in our way. Every day we have a challenge. I have a challenge every day, *alhamdulillah-Llāh*. If I didn’t have the challenges that I have, I think I would be a lousy Sufi, and certainly a lousy *shaykh*. This all would be just an easy thing to do. So we have to lift up our standard. Don’t try to second guess the path. Just try to live a good, righteous path. I don’t care what you call yourself. I don’t know why you wouldn’t call yourself a Muslim or a Sufi, but I don’t care what you call yourself. But just try to live a fairly good, righteous and sincere, hopeful life, even amidst the difficulties in this world we live in today, this Pandora’s box that has been opened up throughout the world [where there is] so much suffering, so much misery.

The earth is rebelling. They had a hurricane in Oman, or a cyclone. Thank goodness, not much was destroyed or hurt. The earth is rebelling. Did you see the earthquake off the coast of Sumatra? They had a tsunami warning in Sumatra today. There was a 7.4 earthquake in the ocean, and they are expecting a tsunami to hit Indonesia, possibly. Everywhere the earth is rebelling. These are signs for people who understand.

At the same time, I want to warn you not to minimize the importance of this small *suhbat*. Don't minimize the importance of this community; don't minimize the importance of these practices; don't minimize the importance of the little work you do because they are like candles in the night, like fires in the night. The Bedouin going through the desert see fires in the night, and they go to the fires where they are welcomed. Even if they are enemies, they are welcomed at the fire. The next day, they are given time to leave, because people have to take care of one another. People say, "Well, I am just a selfish human being. I tried that. I tried spirituality. But I am just a selfish human being and I am going to live out the rest of my life being selfish, doing what I want to do." Well, maybe. I doubt it, but maybe. You still have to interface with other human beings.

So let's try to use these *latā'if* in a proper way. Let's try to turn our attention and see the change and the progress we have made. Shaytan is always there whispering. Many times Shaytan is not able to get people to worship idols; that's no big deal. But many times people are driven from Islam or from Tasawwuf or from the path. Shaytan might not get you to worship an idol, but he might divert your attention away from the path, even to such a degree that even wise people can lose their way. The best way that is being done now, the tool of Shaytan as I see it now is sowing the seeds of enmity and distrust in people and through lies. Just look at the news. It is full of lies and accusations and personal attacks. Who is doing this? Allah? This is Shaytan.

It is the end of the school year and if I were to give Shaytan a grade, I would give him an A+ for the year, all over the world—in Palestine, in Chechnya, Iraq, Iran. He got a big grade this year, because he sowed enmity in the hearts of people. We look at the world we live in today and we look at what is happening among supposedly civilized people, open hostility, reactive-ness. We can almost hear the joy of the Shaytan: laughing, dancing, dancing around the fires, so to speak. What is in the fire? What is fueling the fire? My future, your future, the children's future—if we don't keep it straight. That is what is fueling that fire.

One day you wake up and, I used to give the examples, you go to the mailbox and you open it up and there is a box of ashes. And those are the ashes of your future. You went so far and you turned away. You went so far, and you let Shaytan distract you. You went so far, and it got a hold of your intellect and told you, "I'm not making any progress. I don't know what it is all about." We all go through that. Christian writers wrote about the dark night of the soul. This is not owned by anybody. This is the truth of spiritual people. Spiritual people have a dark night of the soul, maybe more than once. But you persevere, just like the poor folk. They have to plant their seeds every year to just get any food on their table. They are not going to go to Kroger. They are not going to go to Walmart, thank God. If they don't plant, they don't eat. It is a simple formula, but not us. We can not only go to the store, we can buy stuff with a piece of plastic. Don't forget that box of ashes that can come in the mail. That is your future.

The Messenger of Allah (swt) said, "***Shaytan is disappointed that he will not be worshiped in Arabia. But he is not disappointed in kindling the fires of anger amongst the Arabs.***" That is a *hadith*. It is not that there are temples to Shaytan. It is just those interrelationships, those cultural things, those familial things, the hostility, enmity. That is between people, but believe me, it is within your own self, in your own self. It is within your own doubts about yourself, in your own anger about yourself. *Inshā'a-llāh*, you can remember what this is about: how close we are as members of a spiritual community,

as individuals in a community of believers, as faithful people, *inshā'a-Llāh*. Allah (swt) says:

Do not sever relationships. Do not indulge in mutual enmity. Do not enter into rancor and jealousy against one another. Do not be jealous of one another. Be brothers and sisters among yourselves. Become Allah's slaves. It is not permissible for a man (woman) to sever his/her relationship with his/her brothers or sisters for more than three days. It is not permissible for a *mu'min* to not have connection with another *mu'min* for three days. If after three days he should happen to meet him, he should salute him with a "Asalām aleikum." And if he answers, both shall have the rewards. And if the other person does not answer that greeting, then the sin will be on him and the Muslim will be innocent of severing that relationship.

It is the same thing about apologies, and it is the same thing about brothers and sisters and honoring one another. He goes on and on. If somebody [inquires about you], or someone introduces you to someone, you can say, "I am so and so" and announce your name. But when somebody says, "Who are you?" Don't you pause for a second? What do you say? What do you feel in your heart? You don't have to put a label. Who am I? I am just a person who is trying to be a better human being. I am just a person trying to be a better Muslim. I am just a person trying to be a better Sufi. I am just a person trying....I am just a person....I am just...I am....I....me? Are you talking about me? Who am I? That is my journey. I am a creation of Allah.

So my brothers and sisters, *inshā'a-Llāh*, this is the time that we need to remember who we are and why we are. Don't keep worrying about how to measure your progress. If you want to know, I keep a little book. So if you want to know, you can come to my office and I can read from my book where you are. You can't find it in my office. Don't

go looking for it because it is an invisible book. But I can read from it. And it is written in invisible ink. *Asalām aleikum.*