

WEEDING THE GARDEN IN NISFU SHA⁶BAAN

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Bismillaabi-r-Rahmaani-r-Raheem

*Allahumma inna nasalaka mujibati rahmatika
Wa'aza'ima magfiratika, wa salamata min kulli itmin,
wal-ganimata min kulli birrin, wal-fawza bil-jannati min-a naar.*

O Allah, we ask You for words which will make certain Your Mercy, actions which will make certain Your
Forgiveness,
freedom from every offence, a supply of every virtue,
entering Jannah and safety from the Naar.

INTRODUCTION: AT-TAZKIYYAT OF NISFU SHA⁶BAAN

Sayyidina Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) reported that on the night of mid-*Shd'baan* she awoke in the night and found the Prophet not with her. She said:

I got up and searched for him in the darkness of the apartment, and my hand made contact with his feet, and he was prostrate in worship. And of his prayer, I remember these words: "I prostrate before You. You are my form and my spirit, and my heart is in Your safekeeping. I acknowledge

Your favors, and to You I confess my sin. I have wronged myself, so forgive me. Surely, none forgive sins but You. I seek refuge with Your pardon from Your punishment, and with Your Mercy from Your Vengeance, and with Your Approval from your Displeasure. I seek refuge with You from You. I do not tell Your praises, for You are as You have extolled Yourself.”

She continued,

He did not cease worship, now standing, now sitting, until morning came. Then his feet were put up, and as I massaged them I said, “My father be your ransom, and my mother too. Surely, Allah has forgiven your former and your latter sins. Surely, Allah has dealt with you. Is it not so?” And he (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) replied, “O Aisha! Shall I not therefore be a grateful servant? Do you know what happens during this night?”

“What happens?” I asked.

He said, “This is when all the births are recorded for this year, and every death is registered. This is when provisions are allotted to mankind, and their deeds and actions are gathered up.”

“O Messenger of Allah!” said I, “Will no one enter Paradise except by Allah’s Mercy?”

“No one will enter Paradise except by Allah’s Mercy,” he told me. “Not even you?” I asked.

“Not even I,” said he, “unless Allah envelopes me with mercy.” Then he rubbed his hand over his head and face.

This *hadith* tells us everything we need to know about what our attitude should be toward the month of *Sha‘baan*. It tells us about humility, gratitude, sincerity, striving – qualities that, *inshaa’a-Llaah*, we all aspire to have in abundance, along with compassion, submission, love, patience, justice, which are all reflections of the attributes of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*) in the *Asmaa’u-l-Husnaa*. These are qualities we all have, but might not have to the degree and depth that we know we have the capacity to have. Why? Because although we are born in *fitrah*, we have been and continue to be contaminated by our environment, by circumstances, by tendencies, all of which take up ‘space,’ crowding out our essential character.

When we look around us, we see that distractions (*ghaflah*) abound; and conditioning has taken a hold of our minds, bodies and hearts, consuming our thoughts and decisions. To counteract this, what is needed is a process of continuous, or even periodic purification. We have to reverse the process (i.e. reverse osmosis) and replace our questionable habits with their opposite. This process is called *at-tazkiyyat* (spiritual purification).

To undertake *at-tazkiyyat* is to engage in a charity to our self. (Is it not appropriate that *at-tazkiyyat* is linguistically related to *zakaat*?) We engage in different kinds of *at-tazkiyyat* every day through prayer, *muraaqabah* and *muhaasabah*. But there are specific times and means assigned to us by Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*), and practiced by the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) and our *shuyukh*, that facilitate and sustain this cleansing. *Nisfu Sha‘baan* is one of these times.

Through *at-tazkiyyat* we make progress on the path of Tasawwuf, and step by step, it is our means to higher *maqamaat* (stations). It is with this in mind that I will speak about *Nisfu Sha‘baan*. It is my hope that we will ‘see’ with the inner sight (*ba‘seerah*) and discernment (*firaasa*), the example of the *hadith* I quoted at the beginning, and use this *Nisfu Sha‘baan* to find those same characteristics within our self.

The attitude with which to approach this night, and indeed the entire months of *Sha'baan* and *Ramadaan*, is an attitude of submission, effort, restraint, *namaḥ*, patience and remembrance. With these months and these sacred nights, Allah is giving us the opportunity to create a new rhythm in our life.

The following account was received from Abu Nasr (*radiya-Llaah 'anhu*). Aisha (*may Allah be pleased with her*) related that the Messenger of Allah (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) once said to her,

“O Aisha! What night is this?” And she replied, “Allah and His Messenger know best.” Then he said, “The night of the middle of Sha'baan during which worldly actions and the deeds of mankind are carried aloft.... So will you excuse me tonight?”

She said, “Yes,” and related that he performed his prayer like this. He held the upright position only briefly and he recited al-Hamd and a short *surah*. Then he stayed in prostration until the middle of the night, and then he stood up and began a second cycle, with recitation similar to the first. And then his prostration lasted until dawn.

Aisha (*may Allah be pleased with her*) went on to say, “I watched him until I thought Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) had taken His Messenger (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*). After a long time had elapsed, I got close enough to touch the soles of his feet. He stirred, and I heard him say in prostration: “I seek refuge in Your pardon from Your punishment. I take refuge in Your approval from Your displeasure. I take refuge with You, glorious be Your praise. I do not spell out praises upon You for You are as You have extolled Yourself.”

I said, “O Messenger of Allah! Tonight I have heard you utter something in your prostration that I have never heard you utter before.”

“And have you learned it?” he asked.

And when I said “Yes,” he (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) said, “Study those words and teach them, for Jibreel (peace be upon him) instructed me to repeat them in that prostration.”

TURNING TO ALLAH WITH SUBMISSION

On *Nisfu Sha'baan* we put aside our worldly responsibilities for a little while, as the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) did, and concern ourselves only with Allah, turning over every situation to Allah, even for an hour. What does it mean to “turn over every situation to Allah”? Certainly, it does not mean to abandon our responsibilities, or act without consideration. It means instead that we act as if we are seeing Allah, as if we are firm and unswerving in our faith that Allah (*Subḥaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) is present, and we submit to Allah's plan for us. As He says in Qur'an:

فَلَا وَرَبِّكَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ حَتَّىٰ يُحَكِّمُوكَ فِيمَا شَجَرَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَجِدُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَرَجًا مِّمَّا قَضَيْتَ وَيُسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيمًا

Fa-laa wa rabbika laa yu'minuuna hatta yuhakkimuuka feemaa shajara baynabum thumma laa yajiduu fee anfusihim harajam-mimmaa qadayta wa yusallimuu tasleemaa

But no, by Allah! They can have no real faith until they make you judge in all disputes between them, and find in their selves no resistance against your decisions, and submit with the fullest submission. (4:65)

Who are these people of “real faith”—*mu'min*—referred to in this *ayat*? True believers are not constricted (*qabd*), because the light of faith fills their heart until their hearts are expanded (*bast*), filled full. Hence, a true believer (i.e.

one who is true to their belief, not one who believes blindly) is a person who becomes fulfilled (i.e. becomes content and at peace) by the *Tadbeer* (the planning) of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*). Such hearts are made vast by encompassing light and knowledge, supported by the reality of the Bounty of Allah, the *Fadl* of Allah.

If the light of a laser, created by the mind of a human being can be programmed to place nano-dots under the membrane of a single cell before it splits, without harming the cell, then how can we question the subtle power and purpose of the light, *nur i Allah*, and its function and purpose with regard to our transformation? We are given the possibility of seeing and responding to the Bounties and Favors of Allah. Each day we are given the opportunity to see and respond appropriately to the *Tadbir* of Allah.

Whatever plan we can create, as subtle and wise it may ultimately be, it is nothing compared to the Plan of our *Rabb*. Our choices must be in the realm of responding to the Plan of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*), and that is accomplished rightly only when we recognize that our lives are filled with the Bounties and Favors of Allah. It is accomplished only when we are ready to hear, attend to, and obey the command of Allah; only when we commit to obeying Allah, whether Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) abrogates something we thought, or whether Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) confirms something we think. Allah is not responding to our plan; rather, Allah responds to how we respond to His Plan.

Perhaps we do not yet have the refinement to act and think from this state every minute, or every day; but Allah is giving us a special opportunity in *Nisfu Sha'baan* to practice this, to 're-set' our intention for the year. The Hakim Ibn Qasim (*radiya-Llaahu 'anh*) said, "*Allah (Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa) surveys His creatures on the night of mid-Sha'baan and when He purifies some of them, then He keeps that person clean until the next such night comes around.*"

And according to Ya Sar, "*The activity of the year is mapped out on the night of mid-Sha'baan, so that no man may embark on a journey or get married, when he has already been transferred from the list of the living to that of the dead.*"

So this night of *Nisfu Sha'baan* is the night that we want to set our intention for the year, to practice being the person we can be, the person who is 'purified' enough to see his or her inner character and qualities, and who submits to Allah's Plan—a plan that is mapped out for us on this night.

As we know, the highest intentions and decrees of man are only a slight reflection of the Decrees of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*). The Decrees of Allah emanate from the *'alamu-l-amr* (the world of command) to the *'alamu-l-kehalq* (the world of creation), just as all things created by Allah's command respond to Allah in the language or form of their creation, beauty, majesty and function. Any disturbance of this is disobedience to the Will of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*). Whatever preserves it is an attestation and affirmation of the Will and the *Amaanaat* of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*).

MAKING THE EFFORT: THE IMPORTANCE OF NIYYAT

We may ask ourselves, "How can I overcome all the conditioning, distraction and bad habits of the past year—let alone my lifetime?" By just making the effort to remember, with the *niyyat* of faith and submission, begins a cleansing process of purification. We all know there is a relationship between attitude and health, or between patience and tranquility, or between reflection and understanding. These are the cleansing remedies, the way the heart, mind, and body become refined. If we practiced calmness and removed ourselves from the things of the world, just keeping the company of Allah, we wouldn't worry about whether we are going to be tired tomorrow, or worried about work or school tomorrow. Keeping company with Allah is an affirmation of *tamheed*.

If we can find this kind of meaning in *Nisfu Sha'baan*, then this night is a result, not a cause; it is more than an opportunity for us to turn away from the world for a brief period. *Inshaa'a-Llaahu*, we have been doing that from the start of *Rajab* to this day, and if not, then we MUST begin today. *Al-hamdu li-Llaahu*, this talk is coming prior to the actual *Nisfu Sha'baan*, which allows us the time to prepare and take full advantage of the benefits of this night.

Try this leading up to this night: don't give any advice; don't talk yourself into or out of anything; don't think that you are wise or stupid; don't be dissatisfied with anything that has been provided; practice outward and inward gratitude; use kind words; admonish yourself if you falter; be silent, be humble, be fearful of failure...

Remember that ultimately our relationship with Allah is even more important than our relationship with our kith and kin, our children and our families. It is hard to understand at times, probably most of the time. But in this month of *Shab'baan*, Allah is giving us a night to remember that, and a chance to retreat toward, in the company of, near to, within and from Allah (*sayr illa-Llaah, sayr fi-Llaah sayr ma'a-Llaah, sayr mina-Llaah, ad i niyyat*).

These aspects of the journey could be discussed for hours. Suffice it to say, that as one makes progress inwardly, the inner takes on the reality of the outer and we realize that we are journeying with Allah always near. We are with Allah as Allah is with us. We are always assisted by Allah through Allah's Attributes. Indeed, He is within us and we are within Him. All our movements inner and outer are from Allah, as well as our intentions, which are by, with and realized through Allah.

There are ways and times to experience these realities, like *Nisfu Shab'baan*, when the doors are open. Whether you do a hundred prostrations with ten repetitions of Suratu-l-Ikhlās on this night is less important than if you are making the right intention when beginning and ending your formal practice. Putting your head on the ground and weeping in the forest where no one can see or hear you is 1,000 times better than 1,000 *rak'ats* performed with an ounce of pride sustaining your effort.

THE YAQEEEN OF IMAAN

When we engage in and commit to this kind of remembrance of Allah, we are given a sense of certainty (*yaqeen*) that will, *inshaa'a-Llaah*, stay with us. You can have the eye of certainty, the heart of certainty or the knowledge of certainty; but that certainty has to come from Allah.

There is a big difference between a person who is humble and a person who is certain he or she is right, between a person who realizes the *rizq* (provision) comes as a testimony to the Divine Presence and one who thinks it comes as a result of one's own self-centered acts or personal effort. We must hone our perception toward being the first type of person, toward seeing that Allah is the only One Who is the Provider, Who gives us His *Rizq*, so that the name '*Al Qayyum*/the All Sufficient' becomes a reality to us. Only then can Allah bring us to the station of humility and submission – only if the foundation is strong and if our intention is right.

A major task of the true seeker is to find a way to this *maqam* of *nafs al mardiyah*. In this *maqam*, not only is the self content with Allah, but it is also gratified by Allah – grateful and fulfilled. Such gratitude creates fulfillment, and that's why this station is called the 'fulfilled self.' As Allah says in Suratu-l-Bayyinah:

رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ ذَلِكَ لِمَنْ خَشِيَ رَبَّهُ

Radhiya-Llaahu 'anhum wa raduu 'anhu dhaalika liman khashiya Rabbah.

Allah is content with them, and they are content with Him. That is for one who is in awe of his Lord. (98:08)

The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) was asked, **“When shall we attain Allah's contentment with us?” And he replied, “When you are content with your Lord.”** At the stage when you are content with your Lord, the light of your heart is 'on.' The warming light of your heart is 'on,' and it shines through your translucent skin. The heart advances from the wholesomeness of a heart *filled to overflowing with righteousness* to the heart that is in total awe of Allah, constantly inclined toward Him (*munib*), imbued with *hayy* (modesty) for Him in every condition.

This is the goal of the process of *at-tazkiyyat* —polishing the ‘lamp’ of the heart until the dirt and darkness is removed and the *nuri-Muhammad* can shine through. We must be patient with this process and let it live within us. It is a process of remembrance, of remembering the Divine Presence, of remembering our intention, of remembering our inner character, of conscious remembrance of the Attributes of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaah*) in our day-to-day life.

AT-TAZKIYYATU-N-NAFS: WEEDING THE GARDEN

There is a time for everything and an *adab* to everything. These months, *Shab'baan* and *Ramadaan*, are designated by Allah as a time for remembrance and for purification, inwardly and outwardly.

The root of the word *at-tazkiyyat*, as I have pointed out, means to purify; but it also means to sear and to scorch, something that is heated up. Think about some of the activities I have mentioned today that are part of *Shab'baan* and *Ramadaan*, like long prayers, self-reflection, or late night *mubaasabah*; you can see the linguistic connection. When we stand for a long prayer, do your legs burn? Do you find yourself fighting distractions, apathy? It takes certain strength, an internal fire even to ‘burn through’ those distractions. But when we come to the other side, there is a peace and inner tranquility, like the clear night sky.

Or, think about how it feels when we receive a correction from someone we love, especially when we know they are right. It can ‘scorch’ our ego a bit. But when we submit to that correction, take the advice, swallow our pride and are grateful, that is when we make progress. We are engaging in the process of purifying ourselves of our bad habit or our lazy *adab*, and we are refining our character.

What *at-tazkiyyat* deals with are the hidden, unseen, secret parts of our selves and how we interact with every part of our lives. In the process of refining or purifying our self, we will have its focus on our emotions and our feelings, as well as our knowledge and our activities. The process of *at-tazkiyyat* is an inventory of all the multi-faceted ties and associations we have that bind us and bond us with other aspects of life. Together, these facets create an order and regulate all of our tendencies and attitudes. Our thoughts, inspirations, inclinations, movements, eating, drinking, sleeping, work, engagements, entertainment, personal interests, and daily patterns and routines are all within the realm of *at-tazkiyyat*. Nothing escapes it.

In addition to the meanings of purification and heating, the word *at-tazkiyyat* in Arabic also means growth and development, “that which brings [something] to the height of perfection.” I have spoken already about that *maqam* of *nafs al mardiyah*, the station of gratitude and humility that we are seeking through *at-tazkiyyat*. What the linguistic root is telling us here is that both the process and the goal are within the realm of *at-tazkiyyat*. The implication is that the process of purification promotes and sustains our growth and development.

At-tazkiyyat will take different faces and different forms, depending on what is in the process of purifying or defining. When a material thing, like a metal (which, by the way, must be heated in order to be transformed) undergoes this refinement and purification, it changes form. When it is our emotions, or something more abstract, it also takes another appearance, but the reality does not change. The intention of the spirit of purification, growth or development will eventually be visible as we begin to perfect ourselves in all aspects of our being.

You may not see the changes during the process, but eventually, as you become nearer to this state of purification, you see it everywhere. That is why once someone is on the journey, it is ill-advised to not stay on it—you are in the midst of the process, even if you do not see it. Think of it like eye exercises; common knowledge is that eyes do not improve but tend to get worse with age (unless near-sighted). But, if one does certain eye exercises, you can actually improve your eyesight. At the beginning, you cannot see the way that you will see at the end. But if you do the exercises, the results manifest as you do them. So too it is with spiritual progress; you do the exercise and you develop not only better sight of your self but ‘eyes that see;’ eyes that see the light and the signs of Allah.

In many ways *at-tazkiyyat* is a very practical process. One should not always think of this purification as being something philosophical. It has a rhythm and ‘every-day-ness’ to it. Let me use another metaphor here. The *at-tazkiyyat* of a garden involves turning over the dirt in the garden, fertilizing the soil and removing the weeds. A healthy garden is able to produce food for us and sustain a family or community. Not only that, but keeping it in its natural state (i.e. organic, instead of poisoning it) results in healthier and more sustainable food.

The purification of the inner self of a person is similar. Removing weeds is like removing useless or dead thoughts. Clearing the dead trees is like removing false assumptions. Clearing the land and planting seeds is like overcoming wrong action and establishing good habits. Like the garden, consistency and timing are very important. To grow healthy productive plants, we must know when to plan (You can’t plant tomatoes in April; they will freeze!). But to grow the best plants, we must plant at the best times. For certain plants, for example, there is a certain week, or even a certain day that it should be planted. The conditions should be right, the soil soft and moist, the frost should be past... and so on. Similarly, there are certain times that Allah has given us throughout our year that that are the best times to plant seeds in our year. If we seize that moment, that night, we will reap the best yield in the following year. *Nisfu Sha’baan* is one of these moments. Abu Nasr reported that Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) once said,

“I heard the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) say, ‘Allah showers down benefits on four nights: the night of sacrifice, the night of break fast, the night of mid-*Sha’baan* when Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta’alaa*) records the times of deaths and Allah’s provisions and lists the pilgrims, and the night of Arafat until the call to prayer.”

Each of these nights is a *majaaʿ*/corridor to deeper reflection and purification.

Again, I speak in metaphor (*majaaʿ*), and again I remind you that each event of Allah that we have reflected on here—from the mystical journey of the Prophet in *Rajab*, to *Sha’baan* (the corridor toward *Ramadaan* and the *Laylatu-l-Qadr*), and finally to Hajj (dying before we die in the *qiblah* of the heart)—are all reflections of this process. Each is an opportunity for us to align our hearts—so often grounded in the things of this world—with the Divine Presence and Divine Will.

Allah has clearly told us, through the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*), when these times are; it is up to us to turn toward our hearts and plant our seeds when the soil is soft. But just like the garden, we cannot just plant our seeds and then forget about them. Just as important as *when* we plan is *consistency* in the care of the garden. Regardless of when we plant that seed, if we do not follow up, it will be washed away in the next rain, or snapped up by a passing bird or ground hog. Nor will we have good results if we ignore it for weeks, and then flood it with water to make-up for the drought of our attention, or let the weeds grow while telling ourselves, “I can always come in later and mow everything down.” Regular practices and careful attention provide the best fruit. There is an old saying I heard from a *dervish* at the Shrine of Nizamuddin Aulia (*raḍīya-Llaahu ‘anhu*): “*Making, making...one day made.*”

If we want another example of the importance of caring for our inner and outer environment, of seizing the moment for correction and purification, rather than waiting for the crisis that forces our hand, look at the Gulf and the oil spill. We see the damage that greed, acquisitiveness and power can do. Now it will take years, even generations perhaps, to remediate the damage. Saving the lives of the fish and animals from the oil and the livelihood of thousands of people will take effort, commitment, love, compassion and justice...heroic efforts.

Some of the people who once made a comfortable living from the Gulf waters will see their destiny mixed with the pollutants; some won’t even live to see the restoration, if it happens. But even if we have let that ‘oil spill’ happen within ourselves, events like the *Nisfu Sha’baan* are an opportunity to reflect on as well as engage in some ‘deep cleaning’ of ourselves.

But let us take a moment to reflect on the Mercy of Allah. Not only does Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) give us a night like the *Nisfu Sha'baan*, but also gives us the structure and impetus to cultivate the seeds we have planted in the month of *Ramadaan*, the year before. If we approach *Ramadaan* in the spirit of purification and cultivation of our best inner qualities, we will have a completely different experience than if we approach it in the spirit of deprivation. If we can remove enough of the covering, enough of the dross that darkens the light of our heart, instead of getting tired toward the middle of *Ramadaan*, we will become more energetic; we will be able to redouble our efforts.

The Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi, as do the Shadhuliyya, sit in a circle addressing our left sides and right sides, our fronts and our backs: turning toward what is above, below and within. We do this precisely because we know that changing the state of something takes a tremendous amount of effort, commitment, love, understanding, and overcoming as we interface with that Divine Presence. That is what *Ramadaan* is about; Allah is giving us a 'helping hand' in the constant effort that is life.

Through *Ramadaan*, we can reaffirm that first moment of *iman*, the moment when you felt you accepted Islam or Tasawwuf (whether you were born into it or not), the moment you realized you were or needed to be a humane human being, a sincere servant and lover of the Creator. It leads each of us to sacrifice (Eid ul Adha) through the gate of focused restraint, love, submission and awareness of community.

We really owe it to ourselves and to the children to internalize the criteria and standards we have already discussed today, and not just wait until the end of a period of time, or until a crisis comes to apply what we know. Instead of being like the children who wait until the end of the semester to get feedback from the teacher, or the night before a paper is due to start working on it, we must take the opportunities for reflection and *tawajjuh* when they come to us.

These opportunities do not come as a surprise to us—we have been (or should have been) anticipating them all year. We have been notified that our Friend, *Ramadaan*, will visit soon; so we clean our house. We put our affairs in order, and we take stock of our provisions. In addition, because we are people of faith, we also make *du'aa* for the safe travel of this Friend, and greet *Ramadaan* when it arrives, with a deep and meaningful message: "*As-salaamu 'alaykum.*"

Perhaps, because the Guest is very special and we are honored by the visit, we consciously prepare our self with *mubaasabah*, with *dhikr*, with *du'aa*, with *muraaqabah*. In the case of these three months – *Rajab*, *Sha'baan* and *Ramadaan* – our preparation must be very serious and sincere.

Sha'baan, in particular, is the month of special preparation. As we know, often when a guest comes we are very busy hosting and serving that guest. *Inshaa'a-Llaah*, we will be so busy 'serving' in the month of *Ramadaan*, we fill up our schedules with *iftars* and gatherings, and extra prayers in the mosque. These things are very good. But Allah has also provided us with the month of *Sha'baan*, which is for more quiet, internal reflection, following the example of the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*), who quietly got up from his bed to pray to Allah alone, without telling his wife Aisha about where he was going, seeing only the company of Allah. According to a report from Abu Nasr, Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her), once said:

I could not find Allah's Messenger one night, so I went outside, and there he was in the grove, his head turned up toward the sky. And then he said to me, "Are you afraid that Allah and His Messenger would treat you unfairly?"

And I replied, "No, Messenger of Allah. I thought you had gone to one of your other wives." And he said, "On the night of mid- Sha^cbaan, Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) ascends to the lowest heaven and forgives more than the number of woolly hairs on the flocks and herds of the tribe of Kab."

Shab'aaan is the time to prepare for all the aspects of *Ramadaan*—not just fasting (*sawm*) and restraint, but also *muhāsabah*, *muraaqabah*, *subhat*, *imaan*, *dhikr*. Before we know it, our Friend, *Ramadaan*, will be here at our door.

As we read the Qur'an and Hadith during *Shab'aaan*, we are literally receiving 'text messages' from Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaah*) and Rasulu-Llaah, messages saying: "I am near," "I am coming," "Look for me in the sky at dusk." Imam Jafar as-Sadiq said, "*The summons to Ramadaan has the delighted effect of dispelling the drudgery of obedient service and weary toil.*"

In Suratu-l-Baqarah, Allah says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ
أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَاتٍ فَمَن كَانَ مِنكُم مَّرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَهُ
فِدْيَةٌ طَعَامُ مِسْكِينٍ فَمَن تَطَوَّعَ خَيْرًا فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَهُ وَأَن تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ
شَهْرُ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِّنَ الْهُدَىٰ وَالْفُرْقَانِ فَمَن شَهِدَ مِنكُمُ
الشَّهْرَ فَلْيَصُمْهُ وَمَن كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ الْيُسْرَ وَلَا
يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ وَلِتُكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ وَلِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَاكُم وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

Yaa ayyubaa-lladheena aamanuu kutiba 'alaykumu-s-siyaamu kamaa kutiba 'alaa-lladheena miin qablikum la'allakum tattaquun.

Ayyaamam-ma'duudaatiin fa-ma'in kaana miinkum mareedan aw 'alaa safariin fa-iddatum-min ayyaamin ukhara wa 'alaa-lladheena yuteequunahu fidyatun ta'aamu miskeeniin fa-ma'in tatanwaa khayraan fa-huwa khayrul-lahu wa an tasuumuu khayrul-lakum in kuntum talamuun.

Shabru Ramadaan-lladhee unzila feebi-l-Qur'aanu hudal-li-n-naasi wa bayyinaatim-mina-l-hudaa wa-l-furqaani fa-ma'in shabida miinkumu-sh-shabra fa-hyashumu wa ma'in kaana mareedan aw 'alaa safariin fa-iddatum-min ayyaamin ukhara yureedu-Llaahu bikumu-l-yusra wa laa yureedu bikumu-l-usra wa litukmiluu al'iddata wa litukabbiruu Allaaha 'alaa maa badaakum wa la'allakum tashkuruun.

O you who securely believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for others who came before you in order that you may guard yourselves by fasting for the number of days. And if you are sick or traveling, then make it up on a similar number of other days. And for those who are not able, there is expiation for missed days: feeding a poor person. Whoever voluntarily does good, that is better for him. And fasting is better for you if only you knew. The month of *Ramadaan* is the month in which the Qur'an came down as guidance for the people and a clear proof of that guidance, and discrimination between good and evil. So who from among you lives to see the month, let him fast it. If any of you are sick or traveling, then make it up on a like number of days. Allah wants ease for you and does not want hardship for you. He wants you to fulfill the number of fasting days and for you to magnify Allah for having guided you, and to give thanks to Him. (2:183-185)

Hasan al Basri (*radhiya-Llaah 'anhu*) said, "*Whenever you hear Allah saying, 'O you who truly believe,' you must listen carefully and pay close attention. Because those words in the Qur'an are to alert you to a command you have to obey, or to a prohibition you must not infringe upon.*"

So, let us begin our *Ramadaan* internally, today in *Shab'aaan*, and extend our invitation to *Ramadaan* to come into our lives, by doing the seasonal cleaning of our spiritual houses in preparation.

TRANQUILITY OF THE SOUL

If we really got into preparing for the month and acting in the right way, the fast from food will become secondary and will act only as a reminder to our inner *at-tazkiyyat*. Framed by the fast, *Ramadaan* will be *subbat* with the Friend of the Friend...the True Friend, Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*).

Of course this process is full of ups and downs, like everything in life. *At-tazkiyyat* is like the process of making ghee: the evil things, impurities, the *Shaytans* rise to the top and can be filtered off. Do not keep mixing them together. The only way that our souls can be at peace and tranquil is if we strengthen our *imaan*, and continue to engage in the process, no matter what rises to the top. With strong *imaan*, the trials, tribulations and vicissitudes of life do not disturb our faith. We are pleased with Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*), and Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) is pleased with us. Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'aalaa*) says in the Qur'an:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي وَادْخُلِي جَنَّاتِي

Yaa ayyatubaa-n-nafsu-l-mutma'inna, irji'ee ilaa Rabbiki raadiyatam-mardiyya. Fa-dkhulee fee 'ibaadee, wa-dkhulee jannatee.

O you soul in complete rest and satisfaction, come back to your Lord well pleased yourself, and well-pleasing unto Him. Enter you then among My devotees, yes, enter you by My heaven. (89:27-30)

Is there anyone here who would not like their soul to be at rest, in peace and satisfied? During *Ramadaan*, we have the opportunity to create the environment for that. We can create this environment in our homes, in reality, and symbolically and internally in our hearts. If we cannot find peace, happiness and tranquility in our lives, it is because we have not created the environment for it to flourish. *Ramadaan* is a friend who has come to recite Qur'an with us, meditate with us, have *subbat* with us, advise us, listen to us and assist us.

That is what *Ramadaan* is about: bringing light to the darkness, making the soul at rest. We get so absorbed with making sure our body has enough rest, but do we give our soul enough rest? That kind of tranquility of the soul is, in a sense, the goal and the result of *at-tazkiyyat*.

If life is like a road, leading us (*inshaa'a-Llaah*) toward that state, then *Ramadaan* is like a bypass on the highway. It's a parallel road that will get us closer to that state, faster and without all the 'stoplights.' As we approach this month, let us ask ourselves if we will really take advantage of its opportunities. Can we increase our efficiency? Can we take on more responsibility? Can we try to not separate our lives between the spiritual and the not-spiritual, except in ways they need to be separated at times? Can we communicate with our inner self?

DIGGING THE WELL IN ONE PLACE

As I come to my conclusion, I will say this: the power to accede to a higher level of tranquility and a more refined character begins with our heart and our self. We do not need to travel long distances or seek out exotic disciplines. As my beloved Shaykh, Hazrat Azad Rasool (*radiya-Llaah 'anhu*), used to tell me, "We would stay with our Shaykh, be in the company of *mureedeen*, and dig our well in one place, infusing our work, our homes, our words, and our acts with practice, effort, study, service and humble worship." We will have much better results if we plan our garden in one place and work the land there, year after year, refining the soil, adding nutrients, rotating crops. Who would not love to enter a beautiful well-cared-for garden, filled with sweet-smelling jasmine and roses, ripe fruit, a cool fountain, and a shady spot to sit?

The real task before us is to focus on our own garden plot, rather than worrying about everyone else's. We should not be afraid to see the things that are hidden within ourselves, or to hear judgments passed against us if they are there to help us. All these things are the result of a process that we 'bought into' when we made the assurances of faith and commitment to the process of purification, commitments which may have gotten sort of stale or dusty in the company of our daily success or worries.

In the journey toward a purified and good character, the importance of the heart cannot be overestimated. The Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said: **“There is in the body a lump of flesh. When it is wholesome, the whole body is wholesome; and when it is corrupt, the whole body is corrupt. Indeed, it is the heart.”**

So on this *Nisfu Sha‘baan*, let us be aware of the state of our heart, turning toward our heart and recognizing that the heart is the critical meeting place of the *dhaahir* and the *baatin*. The alignment of the outer (through prayer and *muraaqabah*) and inner (through *tawajjuh* and *mubaasabah*) will allow for an open passageway between the *dhaahir* and the *baatin*, between the ‘*aalamu-l-amr* and the ‘*aalamu-l-kehalq*. This doorway is called by some the ‘*aalamu-l-mithaal*, the corridor through which the light of Allah travels, just as a story, concept or transmission travels between the consciousness of the *shaykh* to the *mureed*, vis a vis words or thought – from silence to words to silence. The light from the sun is not the sun, but it is ‘of’ the sun, and expresses the qualities of the sun. It is all One, Wahid. Unity. Oneness. One energy. One truth. One reality.

As we free our hearts from the veils of selfishness, we unveil the Divine Presence and Attributes, perfecting principles complete unto themselves. In that process, our service to this world, our relationships, our community, our family are filled with piety and love, justice and patience, compassion and mercy, tolerance and a sense of provision.

With such an unveiling come new levels of contentment and happiness. If the ultimate aim of this *at-tazkiyyat fee nafs* (purification of the self) is the acquiring of a refined moral and ethical character in order to achieve a level of clarity of vision and understanding of the Divine, a purpose articulated by the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*), then that happiness will be achieved as she or he embodies and manifests the Divine Attributes, and inwardly achieves the level of *baseerah* (insight) to be able to transform the *fiydh* (effusions) of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*), the Prophet, and the *shuyukh* into a profound and lasting state of awareness.

The journey (*sayr i suluk*) through the stages of the refinement of the *nafs* is effectuated by the will (*iraadah*) and sincerity (*ikhlaas*) of the seeker and his or her ability to absorb and utilize the effulgent light (*fiydh*) of Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*) and the Holy Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*). The journey through these special months is a return to the moments of awakening to the life everlasting and life ever Present.

CONCLUSION

So in conclusion, I will end with one more *hadith* on the *Nisfu Sha‘baan*. Abu Hurayra (may God be pleased with him) reported that the Prophet (*salla-Llaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said,

Jibreel came to me on the night of mid-Sha‘baan and said to me, ‘O Muhammad, raise your head heavenwards.’ I asked, ‘What night is this?’ And he replied, ‘This is the night when Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta‘aala*) opens 300 of the gates of mercy, forgiving all who do not make anything His partner. The only exceptions are those who practice sorcery or divination, who are addicted to wine or usury, or who have illicit sex. These He does not forgive until they repent.’

At a quarter of the night, Jibreel came down and said, ‘O Muhammad! Raise your head.’ So I looked up and beheld the gates of Paradise wide open. At the first gate, the angel was calling good news to those who bow and worship this night. At the second gate, the angel was calling good news for those who prostrate and worship this night. At the third gate, the angel was calling good news for those who offer supplication this night. At the fourth gate, the angel was calling good news for those who make remembrance this night. At the fifth gate, the angel was calling good news for those who weep this night in fear of Allah. At the sixth gate, the angel was calling good news for those who submit this night. At the seventh gate, an angel was calling that anyone who asks, his request will be granted. At the eighth gate, the angel was calling ‘Will any one seek forgiveness that he will not be forgiven?’

And I said, ‘O Jibreel! How long will these gates remain open?’ And he replied, ‘From the beginning of the night until the break of dawn.’

So, what is our instruction for *Nisfu Shab'baan*? To bow and worship Allah, to offer *du'aa*, to remember Allah, weep for fear of Allah, submit, ask a request of Allah, and seek forgiveness. Each of these things is a doorway to *at-tazkiyyatu-n-nafs*, doorways to nearness to Allah, and tranquility of the soul. These are messages not just for *Nisfu Shab'baan*, but for every day and every night. Every day we need to be open to striving with and against our nafs, striving to act in harmony with the Divine Presence and thereby receive the *baraka* that is constantly being showered upon us.

On this *Nisfu Shab'baan*, when the ‘rain of *baraka*’ is particularly prolific and bright, let us take the opportunity to plant and cultivate the *mahabbatu-Llaah* (love of and for Allah) in our hearts, and to re-engage ourselves in the daily process of *at-tazkiyyat*. Let us make the intention that in this coming year our names will be written down in list of people who truly understand what it means to obey and be in submission to Allah (*Subhaanahu wa ta'alaah*); people who engage in the dynamic interface between the *dhahir* and the *baatin*, the hidden and the revealed, the *'aalamu-l-amr* and *'aalamu-l-ghalq*. Let us establish a relationship between our self and the *nuur-i-Muhammad*, and take Prophet Muhammad (*salla-Llaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) as our *qudwah* (good example), trusting in means, trusting in the process of the path and self struggle, so that we can be counted among the people who are ‘true believers.’

Wa Llahu labu ul-haqqi wa huwa yahdi-s-sabeel.
Hasbuna-Llahu wahdahu wa ni'mal-wakeel.
Wa salli 'alaa Sayyidina Muḥammadin wa alibi wa sahbibi ajma'een
Wa-l-hamdu li-Llaahi Rabb il-'aalameen.

Truth belongs to Allah; it is He who shows the way.
Allah, alone, suffices us, and what a fine guardian is He!
Blessings upon our master Muhammad
and his family and Companions altogether
and praise is due to Allah, Lord of the Worlds.

CLOSING DU'AA

Allaahumma salli 'alaa sayyidinaa Muḥammad,
al-fatih ughliq, wa-l-hatim limaa-sabaq,
nasir al-haqq bi-l-haqq,
wa-l-haadi ilaa siraata-l-mustaqeem,
wa 'alaa aalibi wa sahbibi
haqq qadrihi wa miqdaribi-l-'adheem.

O Allah shower Your Blessings upon our master Muhammad,
the opener of what has been closed
and the seal of what has passed,
the champion of truth by the Truth,
and the guide to Your straight path,
and on his family and his companions
with the equivalent to the greatness due to his exalted status.