

July 22, 2010

Thursday

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Title: [Fikr and Dhikr](#)

DVD title: Contemplating Death and Understanding the Meaning of Life:  
Nuances of Meditation, Dhikr and Reflection/Tafakkur

To continue with the subject of last night, which is *muraqabah* and *mahasabat*, there is a great contrast that needs to take place in the heart and mind of the seeker. Perhaps these things define a seeker in a certain way: the willingness to contemplate things that are not desirable to contemplate. Making *mahasabat* means you are looking at your day, assessing your own record of intentions and of deeds, for just that one day. We are urged by our *shuyukh*, by Nebi Muhammed (sal) and Allah (swt) to call to mind at least once every day the imminent prospect of death/*mowt*. We enlightened Westerners, we educated people, don't want to think about that, because what's the purpose? So there's a kind of dance we do in our minds: what kind of person contemplates death; we should celebrate life.

So a picture is painted, probably in every religion and every tradition, where you view so many things in this life and this world that are miserable, difficult, and terrible; and it is contrasted with Paradise, a place where you don't have to view the miseries of this world. You don't have to see death or destruction; even the natural destruction that takes place. You don't have to see decay and unhappiness, grief, loss, which are things we all see in this world. To make it easier for us to understand, we are encouraged to contemplate death. Imam al Ghazali was an incredible man and writer. Among many things, he wrote the *Ihya Ulūm al-Deen*. Let me read to you what he says.

*Let man in every hour look to his limbs and his extremities. Let his thoughts dwell on how the worms must need devour them, and upon the fashion in which his bones shall rot away. Let him wonder whether the worms will begin with the pupil*

*of his right eye or his left; for there is no part of his body that shall not be food for the worm. He can do nothing for himself but to understand and act sincerely for the sake of Allah. In like fashion, let him meditate on that which we shall presently relate concerning the punishment of the grave, the inquisition of Munkar and Nakar, the congregation and quickening, together with resurrection, the sounding of the call, and the Day of the Great Exposition. For it is in thoughts such as these that prompts remembrance of death in the heart and wants to make ready for it.*

He precedes that – I read the second part first, because the first part is easier to digest – with this: “*There are two reasons why humankind procrastinates and cherishes long term hopes of this world (even though everything proves there is no long-term hope in this world).*” We celebrate a hundred years of life like Nadia’s or Musa’s mother—long term? He says,

*There are two reasons for this tendency of humankind to procrastinate. First is love of this world, which makes us reluctant ever to contemplate the idea that we have to leave it. (We don’t even want to hear this – admit it!) And the second factor is ignorance, for practical purposes of the fact that death does not come at a fixed age, but could overtake us at any moment. Upon this, having grasped that the cause is ignorance and love of this world, one must cure oneself by destroying the cause. Ignorance is effaced by clear meditation with an aware heart, and through hearing eloquent wisdom issuing from hearts that are pure.*

*In the case of love of this world, the cure by which it is driven from the heart is harsh, for this is a chronic illness, the treatment of which surely exercised both ancients and moderns alike. Its treatment lies only in faith in the Last Day and the Great Punishment and Generous Reward which shall then be assigned. When one perceives the meanness of this world, and the great preciousness of the next, one*

*will despise inclinations toward worldly things in this world. This would be so, even if one would be given authority over the earth from the east to the west.*

So contemplate death—not tonight, tomorrow. We don’t want to think about ourselves, our children, our friends, worms... we don’t want to think about it. But that’s what will happen. People avoid it by burning their bodies. The idea that this contrast, of spending some time in *rābita* – this is a description of *rābita*. The part that is missing is that you contemplate death in this way and you realize the only escape from the miseries of it is through the grace of Allah (swt), and Prophet Muhammad (sal), and the love of your *shaykh*. That’s *rābita*, but it is contrasted against something else. Instead of asking the question, “Why is there so much misery in this world,” whether it’s from natural causes like Haiti or from human causes like Darfur, understand that it does happen.

The psychology of some human beings is such that they have no fear of death, and they won’t contemplate it. Consequently, we have what we call “man’s inhumanity toward man.” But there is a choice. The choice is on the one hand to be very realistic about the limitations of this life; and on the other hand (not the opposite) we are very aware of the limitations of life and we are all passing through it. Understand that we are placed here to do good, not to waste a minute, a breath, or an action. Strive to fill life full so you can have a fulfilled life. Fill life full, not just because it’s a good way of guaranteeing a good place in the *akhirat*. Some people do it for that reason, of course. Fill life full because we have this limited time, and a full cup doesn’t make any noise. It doesn’t rattle our brain, or our faith. It’s full. I have a period of time; I strive to fill it full.

The idea is this, a saying you find in the east: “If you start building a *masjid*, Allah finishes it.” The idea is if you start doing things that are good, Allah will finish it and make it even better. What else do we have to know? If our intellect cannot understand death, what do we expect it to understand about Allah? If our intellect cannot grasp the nuances of death, which we see all around us every day, how can we expect our intellect

to grasp the full meaning of life itself, and the Life-Giver? The Life-Giver is not some distant god; it is the air we breathe, the light that shines on us, the food that we eat. These are all manifestations of the Life-Giver. So, growing the food like Mustafa and all of you do here – and he would like more of you to help, by the way – preparing the food, like all of you do to some degree; making things beautiful to the eyes; saying good words to uplift the hearts, this is the Life-Giver. These are all affirmations and introductions to the *akhirat*, which is here and now. It's not tomorrow. How do we know? Because everything is here and now. Allah is Present.

It does not say in the Qur'an, "Send me a message of remembrance, and I'll get it later on and I'll remember you when I receive it." It is right now. **"Remember Me and I'll remember you."** **"Whosoever you look, there is the countenance of Allah."** So why waste time? We waste time because we think we own it. We waste time just like we waste water. Let the water run. Nobody in the desert lets the water run, only people in the city. What desert-dweller lets the water run? They know it is a very precious commodity. Life is a very precious commodity. If we treat it that way, then Allah tells us we won't have fear. There are two reasons you don't have fear: either you are too ignorant, or you don't have anything to be afraid of yet.

Allah says you won't have fear. How do we keep this in mind? We make *tafakkur*. We make *muraqabah*. It would be wrong for me to sit here and tell you that *tafakkur* was limited only to Muslims who called themselves Sufis. There was a great exoteric scholar, Faqr al-Deen al-Razi, a very famous scholar, who discovered how to unblock the block. What blocks our hearing of these words that I am speaking? "I don't like to hear about death. I'm forced to hear the *shaykh* talk about it tonight, but I will forget it as soon as I leave the *masjid*. That's old-fashioned religious stuff." But it's very real, fortunately or unfortunately. Al-Razi said, and remember he's not a Sufi:

*The heart's invocation of God, Allah, is that a man meditates on the secrets of things created by Allah Most High, until each atom of all the atoms becomes like a polished mirror set over against the unseen world. And when the servant of Allah looks with his mind's eye on created things, the rays of his seeing pass from them to the world of majesty.*

Again, Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī (ra), in a chapter in the *Ihya* called *Bab al-Tafakkur* (the Door of Contemplation), first establishes for the student the value of *tafakkur* by quoting many of his predecessors, including Prophet Muhammed (sal) and certain of the Sahabah. One person he quotes is Bishr al-Haafi, who died just in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century after the Hijra, around 225. He said, “*If people were to meditate on the Majesty of Allah, they would not be disobedient towards Him.*” Then Imam al-Ghazālī explained the real benefits of *muraqabah* and *tafakkur*. He said, “*True contemplation is differentiated from normal thinking, inasmuch as normal thinking is always making two observations and then drawing a conclusion from the relationship between them.*”

He takes a lot of time to say this in his book. He talks about the different modes of meditation and reflection, and distinguishes between *tafakkur*/reflection, meditation and contemplation in his terms. He distinguishes between *tafakkur* and *itibar*, which is considering or learning lessons; and *tadhakkur*, which is to recall or be mindful of something; and *nadhar*, which is examining something, speculating, trying to understand, seeing something but speculating about it; and *ta'amul*/reflection, and *tadabbur*/pondering. He makes these distinctions. We mix them up: contemplation, meditation, considering, mental examination. So you contemplate something, “I’m just examining something mentally.” He says these things are different. Learning about something and recalling something, these are different.

Each one has its own benefit and its own uniqueness. Even though *tadabbul* and *ta'amul* and *tafakkur* are almost synonymous, *tadhakkur* and *itibar* and *nadhar* are all a single

process: that of passing on from two related observations and arriving at a third one. “I contemplate this; I think about it. I observe this against the background of that, and then I come to a conclusion.” But to extend one’s understanding and cognition, one’s real depth of knowledge, you have to have a continuous process. [It cannot be] an interrupted process, where you look at this and that, and draw a conclusion. A real seeker is given a real teaching, and that is, “Don’t break the process.” Don’t look at this and say, “Where was I yesterday? I was here yesterday, and seeing it in this way yesterday. I don’t see any change.” This is not *tafakkur*. You are not going to get the benefit of *tafakkur*. You are not going to get the benefit of *muraqabah*, because you are comparing and comparing with your mind, which is already rigid, and has already assured itself that it knows what it is doing.

You, yourself, have raised yourself to the level of expertise where you are going to judge what is progress, and what is not progress, what is learning and what is not learning. You have already elevated yourself to the position you say you are trying to achieve, hence there is also no humility. So there is a kind of arrogance. It’s fine if you are comparing two different things: “Here’s the experiment I did yesterday, and here’s the one I did today. What’s the result of yesterday and today? The temperature is this and that. Under these circumstances, it is that.” That’s okay. That’s something else. But that is not going to give you any cognitive change in insight. That only comes when there is a continuing process, and it is a subtle process. Every time you step off of it, you have to wait for the next train, the next opportunity.

What’s the background of all this? You don’t know when death is going to come. You don’t know when that capacity is going to end. That’s why I said, you put these things in contrast to each other. We keep making the effort to have more knowledge, in a limited amount of time, that you don’t know how much is assigned. Could be one day, could be a hundred years; you don’t know. That’s a continuum. Isn’t your life a continuum? “I’m not going to live tomorrow, because I want to save it for later on.” How? Are you going

to put yourself into some kind of cryogenic suspension? This needs to be a continual process, limited only by one thing. What's the only thing that limits the continuum of meditation and contemplation? The length of your life, that's it. That's what should be striven for. Does it mean you don't work, but you sit in contemplation all the time? No. It means you learn how to contemplate while you work, while you serve, while you cook.

“My meditation is my cooking.” No it's not. “My meditation is my fishing.” No it's not. You could be meditating while you are cooking or fishing; contemplating. But cooking or fishing is not going to make you meditate. “But I get lost in it. I love it. I'm in love with it.” Well, that's good. When your hands don't work because you are in the grave and the worms are eating your hands, where is the cooking?

Then he goes to a very interesting place. I'm talking about *Ihya* of Imam al Ghazāli, because it's probably one of the most clear writings on these subjects, and it goes back a very long way. In the third part of his *Kitab al-Tafakkur*, his book on reflection, he discusses what subjects are appropriate, and what subjects are not appropriate for *tafakkur*, and he divides it into two categories. He said the first comprises human qualities and their corresponding actions, like acts of obedience or disobedience toward your own Creator. On the one hand, those lead to the *barzakh*, and on the other, those who bring salvation and reward. Then he says the second category refers directly to meditation upon Allah and His creation, meditation upon the *dhat*, the essence.

Meditation upon the *dhat*, however, was forbidden by Prophet Muhammed (sal) because, in attempting to reach it, the mind cannot succeed because the mind itself is not capable of that. So it becomes an exercise not in futility but in arrogance. But, he says, you can contemplate the *Asmā' al-Husna*, the Attributes of Allah. You can contemplate what you can see, what you can hear, what you experience. To just make that step and understand that those attributes are names of Allah (and it's a little step, not a big one) tolerance, patience, understanding, justice, etc. you are contemplating a reflection of the Divine.

If I go to the mirror and contemplate a reflection of myself, it's not my self, but it looks like me. It tells me about me: I didn't shave today. (You girls have to say, "I didn't put my hair up today.") You can contemplate the Names and the Attributes and they are, he says, "*the most fertile ground for contemplation.*" So too are the manifestations of Allah's Wisdom. When you contemplate the sayings and the ideas and the teachings of the *awliyā*, when you contemplate the power within the human soul and the world around us, the power of your own soul, the power of your own belief, the power of your own capacity [you will find the wisdom inherent there]. He describes in a very beautiful passage, the wisdom inherent in many of the facets of nature and the human form and the human soul, in which He is trying to demonstrate that if we don't utilize our innate, inherent ability to learn from what surrounds us and what is within ourselves, then the blame is on us.

There is no shortage of things to contemplate. There is no limit to what can be seen in nature: good and bad. There is no end to things to contemplate. If you don't contemplate it, it is because of your own laziness and your own lack of respect for the capacity and capabilities that our inherent in human creation, indeed, [for] the reason why human beings were created. I am going to quote to you what Imam Al-Ghazālī says,

*There exists no creature great or small that does not contain innumerable wonders. Do you think that the spider learned its art by itself? Or that it brought itself into existence. Or that a human being did so and taught it? Or that it could have no guide or teacher? Can any person endowed with perception doubt that that creature is tiny, weak and powerless? But if the elephant, a great creature whose strength is manifest, is incapable of doing the same thing that a spider does, how can that feeble creature do it? Is not that spider, with its form and figure, its movement, its self-direction, and its marvelous handiwork testimony to its own Omniscient Maker, the Almighty and All-Wise Creator? So this chapter might*

*continue without end, the creatures being innumerable in their form, in their ways and their character.*

There is no end to what can be contemplated. What did he do? He compared two things. He compared two things for us to draw a conclusion, because of what? *Tadhakkur*. Then, of course, what would be the next thing he would do? He would talk about the benefits of that. He speaks about the benefits of *tafakkur*, *fikr*. He talks about the various forms of meditation and its effects, and especially, he talks about *dhikru-Llāh*, in the sense of not just saying the same thing over and over again, but mind-fullness, mindful remembrance. He talks about the four different aspects of *dhikr*, and his main point (something we should try to remember) is that true *tafakkur* begins or brings to the heart a knowledge that transforms the heart, which heightens the consciousness, which spiritualizes the being and the actions and the words and the thoughts of the individual.

So meditation or *fikr* is of greater benefit, he even says, than *dhikr*. Because contemplation spiritualizes everything you do, everything you think, every word you speak. He says,

*The fruits of meditation, then, consist of varieties of knowledge, varieties of states and actions. The fruit specific to each, however, is nothing more than a form of knowledge. When knowledge is acquired within the heart, the state of the heart is altered. When the heart's state changes, the actions of the bodily members change. Thus action follows spiritual states, states follow knowledge, and knowledge follows meditation. When the knowledge is acquired within the heart, the state of the heart is altered. When the heart-state changes, the actions of the bodily members change. (Your actions change.) Thus, actions follow spiritual states, states follow knowledge, and knowledge follows meditation. Meditation is, therefore, the beginning of and the key to all action.*" Now he is applying action.

*What we have said thus far will show you how excellent a thing is meditation and how it surpasses invocation/dhikr, and tadhakkur/remembrance. For reflection/fikr is dhikr with something else added. (Fikr/contemplation is dhikr with something else added.) Dhikr for its part is better than any physical action, and if an action is good, it is by virtue of the dhikr accompanying it. (Remembrance.) Consequently, meditation is better than any other deed. Should you wish to understand how meditation transforms one state, then take, for example, what was stated earlier about the Afterlife. Given that meditation upon it brings us the knowledge that the Afterlife is preferable to the life of this world, once such knowledge is firmly rooted in our hearts as a matter of certainty (obviously not the first time you contemplate it), our hearts change. (Once it is firmly rooted in our hearts that the afterlife is better than this life, then our hearts change.)*

*Turning our longing for life beyond and renunciation of worldly things, that is exactly what we mean by the term hal/state. In this connection, five separate stages can be distinguished. First: remembrance or invocation, tadhakkur, which consists of bringing to mind two cognitions. Second: meditation or reflection, tafakkur, which is a search for the cognition that one seeks to obtain from the two concepts already in mind: life and death, this world and the next. Third: obtaining the desired cognition, the heart's illumination, the result of this contemplation. Fourth: a change in the heart from its former state, by virtue of the illumination obtained. Fifth: service performed for the heart by the bodily members in conformity with the new state prevailing within it.*

This is why we say *indirāj an-nihāyah fi'l-bidāya*. When you achieve these higher states, you then serve the bodily state in this physical world. Not just your own but others. Once you are free of this, you serve it freely. Once you are free of the attachments, you serve it freely.

I will end with some statements of a great Persian Sufi from Khorasan. Shaykh Ahmed a-Jam, or Jami he was called. He wrote something called, *Hadiqa al-Haqiqah*. He talked about *dhikr* and meditation, *tafakkur*. I will just read to you something he said about the relationship between meditation and invocation.

*We come to the question of fikr, dhikr and the heart's discernment, firāsa, and their respective origins in the nature of imagination/khayāl. (All of which we have talked about extensively this year.) For those in the material realm (in the 'ālam al-khalq or 'ālam arkan), dhikr is preferable to fikr. Invocation is the provision of the lover in the search for the beloved. ("Where are you? Are you hiding?") Whoever lives in the spiritual realm (in the 'ālam al-bātin or the 'ālam al-amr) has knowledge of the heart, and fikr is better than dhikr.*

If you are living in the world, and your mind is on the world, *dhikr* is better than *fikr*. Not living in the world, like we are living in the world. But if your consciousness is only of the world, then you will be doing *dhikr*. When you start to live in the inner world, when you want to come into the inner world, then *fikr* is better than *dhikr*. "*Reflection is the heart's guard against drowning in the sea of forgetfulness.*" So I am going to end there because I want to pick up there again. I want to pick up again at this point where we talk about *dhikr* and *fikr* in a very realistic way, but I don't think we should avoid the obvious. I don't think we should avoid the inevitable. I certainly don't think we should avoid the benefits of what we spoke about last night, *nubh/vigilance*. Because if we are not vigilant, believe me, we miss all of this. This is, after all, a path of subtlety. When you find yourself on it, you won't lose yourself. *Asalaam Aleikum*.