

August 25, 2010

Wednesday

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Title: [Intention Sets the Standard](#)

DVD title: Niyyat/Intention: the Foundation for Success

*Dinner blessing:* O Allah, everything we have comes from You, and we need to have a deeper faith that the more we give, the more we receive. In this time of the *zakat al-fitr*, and in this month, the giving of *sadaqa* is so important. Please, Allah, remind each one of us in our hearts and our hands and in our pockets to give to those who are in need, and to answer the call of those whose hearts call out, but whose lips are ashamed to ask. We ask you Allah (swt) to keep in our hearts and minds our brothers and sisters in Pakistan who are suffering terribly, and others. We ask You, Allah, as we look at our gardens and at our table and in our refrigerators, and at our scales, to remember those who have less.  
*Amin.*

*Suhbat:* What I think would be good to remind us of tonight is some of the elements of our inner spiritual development. Obviously, the first one you are very familiar with is intention, *niyyat*. We all realize, especially in the month of Ramadān, because you set a standard intention for the month, and then a daily intention, *niyyat* is a foundation and is assigned a great deal of importance in Ramadān. I don't think it is just to remind us that we are going to fast tomorrow. It's the association of *niyyat* with success, or the outcome of *niyyat*. Actions follow intentions. There is another implication to that, one that is a two-edged sword in how you use it. Maybe I should call it a very sharp knife, which you can use for cutting bread (and other things), or you can use for nefarious reasons.

When you set a standard, like an intention, you are really setting the standard of how much progress you are going to make. Indeed, to the detail you set an intention, you can actually set the intention to be aware of the progress that you make. When you are

setting a Ramadān intention, along with hundreds of millions of other people, there is the implication that there is a collective result as well as a personal result. I think those of us who try to fast at other times of year realize that fasting is a lot different during Ramadān than it is if you are trying to fast the three days a month, or even in Sha'ban and Rajab. Something is there. You can say it's psychological; but even if it is, it tells you that intention puts you in a mindset so that the actions that follow the intention are substantiated by that, or increased by that intention.

The first element is to examine your intentions, your conscious ones and your unconscious ones. How can you examine an unconscious intention? You ask yourself, what are my intentions? If you have trouble with that, ask yourself, "What is my attitude? What are my actions? What are the words that are coming out of my mouth? What am I telling myself? What am I not telling myself? What am I avoiding telling myself?" These are all results of intentions. You know it's true. This is a profound, deeply spiritual teaching, but it's not an alien teaching coming from some esoteric situation.

The second part of that is once you have set the intention, it is really up to us to live by it. In other words, the intention provides the opportunity for us, and shows us actions or lack of actions in certain ways. But we have to decide we are going to strive to live by that intention, or take the opportunity to act on that intention when it comes to us. It's not just automatic: I make a good intention, and only good things are going to come to me. That's not the way it works. If you make a good intention, the opportunity for good actions, good words, and good attitudes comes. But you have to accept that. We can't avoid our responsibility at any point along the way. We might not like that.

A lot of people put a lot of effort into avoiding their responsibilities by diverting their attention, finding fault, criticizing others, questioning their own progress, or the reason why you do this or that, and all the philosophical questions that come about. These may

have legitimacy in the realm of philosophy, but when it comes in the realm of intention and action, the legitimacy lies in you creating a good intention and seizing the opportunity when it comes to fulfill it. I guess you could say it's the old story: if you have flour and water and salt, make bread. If Allah provides the flour, water and salt, it's still up to us to make the bread, and recognize what it is for. We set the standard and have to live by it.

Of course, we could be very clever and have a limited intention, then we don't have to set our standard too high. Or we can be very self-deception and set our standard very high so that we fail. Then we have something legitimate to criticize (since we very rarely criticize ourselves), or we criticize ourselves in a very tongue-in-cheek, disingenuous way. "Oh, I guess I'm not fit for this standard. I'm not the person you think I am, or that I thought I was." So we program ourselves for failure. Very quickly we have in that program a little trojan that makes it a nefarious program. You can program yourself for failure.

If you really look at it, we do that because we inherently believe that *niyyat* is real. If you program for failure, it's because you believe you can program for success, in a way. The objective of this journey, the *suluk*, is to at least attain to a state of absence from the ego at times. That level of our desire nature, we get tired of struggling with because you make struggle [negative], instead of just accepting that it's a struggle. Fine, life is a struggle. There are so many things you can struggle against. Look at the prejudice today, how Islamophobia prejudice is causing so many political problems. Nobody is paying attention to what is going on in Afghanistan, because the news media is filled with this. To strive for moments when you 'pass away' into Allah, before you pass away is not a bad goal. It's like an extended vacation, where you can really take advantage of it and not come back and say, "Well, I need a vacation from my vacation."

In Qur'an Allah says, **Worship Allah, keeping worship purely for Him.**" It's really a description of *fana*. It means you get to a point where, whatever your intention is, it is beyond being for you. It's a good intention, and goodness itself is very rewarding. It's a refined intention, because refinement is appealing to the higher nature of the human being. Just like when Abu Bakr looks at fine jewelry made by one of his craftspeople. They've added their skill to what Allah has created, and refined not the jewel or the gem itself, but have put it in a context that others can appreciate, perhaps even a lesser context, in a strange way. We have an opportunity to play a role where we begin by pursuing our own spiritual development, where we realize the way of making an intention.

If we say, making an intention purely for Allah, it means making that intention in a way that it embraces those Attributes and Names of Allah (swt), which make our life refined and acceptable. People want to emulate it, and we want to sustain it. I don't think any of us would reject an offer by Allah (swt) like the offer of the Holy Shadow. Do you remember that story? I don't think any of us would reject an offer by Allah, if He sent a representative (metaphorically) to us to say, "You've lived such a good life. We're going to make sure all you feel for the rest of your life is compassion and peace." Would you say, "Oh, no. That would be boring? How would I ever appreciate that if I didn't experience anger, pain, and misery?" I don't think any of us would reject that. Indeed, that is an offer that is being made to us. But it depends on our *niyyat*. Why would we not make a *niyyat* that would enable us to be that? Why would we, unless we were so wrapped up in our *nafs ammāra*, in our anger, fears, worries, whatever they may be?

We have this opportunity to play a role where we begin by pursuing spiritual development for ourselves, which is where most of us started. It's a kind of selfish desire. Then we realize a way of making an intention that is purely for Allah (swt). One of the results of that is, in your worship you become more and more absorbed. If you become even momentarily absorbed in the process/reality/ritual that reflects Allah, we realize that

Allah has rewarded us in that moment with spiritual development, with refinement. It's probably true that we are probably not making our *namaz*, not doing our meditation, not doing our recitations and *du'ā* for that reason right now—probably not. We are still in training. But there are many different ways people have looked at intention. Imam Jafar Sadiq (ra), the grandson of Prophet Muhammed (sal) said,

*There are three kinds of worshipers. It is based on niyyat. The first are those who worship Allah because they fear Allah. Their worship is that of the fearful slave, worried they will be punished. Then there are those who worship Allah (swt) for the sake of reward and compensation. Their worship is that of the people who seek reward: wealth, name, fame. Then there are those who worship Allah (swt) because they love Allah, their worship is that of people who are free.*

What does it mean to love? It means you appreciate and love the experience of compassion, mercy, tolerance, patience, perseverance and justice. When you don't have it, you miss it. You are offended by its lack. We watch what is going on in this world today, in this country and others, and we are offended by injustice. I hope. Some of us have spent our whole lives being scapegoated. I count myself one of them. From the earliest years, I have been a minority, scapegoated by the same phobic fears of the same type of people. Only it's worse now, because it is instantaneously global, or even domestic. When I grew up in Pittsburgh, the people in Squirrel Hill (the Jewish community) had no idea what was going on in Mount Lebanon where I lived, in the south hills. They were all living in this Jewish ghetto. Now, it's instantaneous.

If you really think about it, it appears there are really two kinds of worship a person has to focus on: one is to not worship at all, because the people who are in the second category are self-worshippers trying to gain compensation for their selfishness, to prove their worth in *dunya*. The selfish worshiper cannot be worshipping Allah, because they are worshipping themselves. The Qur'an reveals to us that worshipping Allah (swt) is part of

our *fitrah*, our nature. It must mean that if we are not fully aware of and involved in the worship of Allah, there is some kind of a veil between ourselves (or whatever we consider to be ourselves), and our essential nature. Something is blocking our sight of who we really are, so that we don't try to bring that out more. Then we are diverted by whatever—money, fame, name, people, desires, relationships, lack of them, boredom, repetition—instead of seeing that people, relationships, repetition, service, compensation all come naturally to the believer. So we are searching for something that is already coming to us, but we want it on our terms. Allah (swt) says in Suratu-l-Ruum,

**Set your purpose for religion as a man by nature upright, the nature in which Allah has created man. There is no altering the nature framed by Allah. That is the right religion, but most people do not even know this path.**

He tells us what the right religion is – accepting your destiny; but the nature in which He created us frames our destiny. All that goodness – you don't alter it. Any act of *ibāda* that is activated by selfish interests is really not only a deviation from what He says is the path... **Men do not even know this path...** but it is also a deviation from the belief in the unity of Allah (swt). It's an absolute denial of *tawhid*. *Tawhid* in this sense doesn't mean just "one God." It means everything that is framed within one Truth. A person is associating themselves with Allah; it becomes shirk. Everywhere in Qur'an we find affirmation of the unity of Allah and the denial of the existence of anything that can be compared to Allah (swt). As a result, that kind of attitude is in denial of the reality that there is only Allah. How does that mean anything? It only means something when you make the right *niyyat*, and it becomes clear to you that your actions follow your *niyyat*.

Those who worship Allah for the sake of love, for the respect of compassion, for the warmth that mercy brings, for the uprightness and sense of propriety that justice brings, for the reward that comes naturally from patience, for the character development that comes from tolerance and perseverance... anyone who worships Allah for the sake of

love (and that is love) are free people. It's interesting that in Islam a free person is an 'abd, a slave, but enslaved to the qualities of Allah, and not wanting to deviate from that. When we are fighting against this enslavement by practices, prayers, fasting, responsibilities outside of our own family, sense of community/*ummah*, what are we fighting? What are we resisting?

Love as it is defined in this case is *jedhba*, attraction. Those who worship Allah (swt) because they are attracted to Allah (swt), to these Attributes—love, truth, peace, balance, equity, etc.— are those people who know how to reveal what needs to be revealed, how to keep secret what needs to be kept secret, how to hide what needs to be hidden, and when to show what needs to be shown. It is to know how, when, to whom, and why. It means those people who respect the truth so much in its subtlety have some sense of what it means to love Allah (swt) in their hearts, and they/we/you are inclined toward Him, *nisbah*. We lose any other objective other than to be in His good presence and thoughts. The motive of our actions is to be the beloved of Allah (swt). That is sufficient for many people, to use those words. But I try to understand and explain what that means. Imam Ali said,

*My Lord, I do not worship You because I'm afraid of You, of Your hell, nor because I want Your Paradise. I worship You because I have found You fit of being worshiped. You, Yourself guide me to You. You have called me to You. Had You not, I would not have known what You are.*

Do we get a picture of Imam Ali sitting in his hut getting a phone call from Allah? Or the town crier coming by to say, "Ya Ali, there is a call for you from Allah." Where does he hear this call? He hears it in his heart and mind. He sees the necessity for it in his life, and he comes to certain conclusions. Why? Because he accepted the teachings of Prophet Muhammed (sal), because he memorized the words of the Qur'an, and because he made *niyyat* all the time, wherever he went.

In the beginning of this journey, each one of us goes forward with the help of love and attraction, relationships and relatedness; but after having gone through a few of these stages, we realize that love is different between human beings and the love of Allah. We try to give up one kind of love sometimes, because as individuals we are seeking the Divine Presence, the presence of Reality and Truth in everything. When you are seeking the presence of truth in the person sitting next to you, the person you are married to, your parent/uncle/aunt/brother/sister... you are getting a not-pure version.

So there is some disappointment or frustration or disconnect. We question whether such a pure love, such a pure relationship exists. We see that inside of us there is this love, this respect, and we see what is lacking in people, and what is not lacking in people. We have to make compensations for other people's limitations. That's because we sense what the Unlimited is. So seeking the Presence of Reality, of Truth within ourselves and in those around us is a very noble enterprise. We see all the criticism of Islam today in the world attributed to Islam, as opposed to individuals within Islam. The person who loves sees what the truth and the untruth are. You wonder: what kind of lives do those people have who are out on the streets slashing others?

You may not have heard the news. A man got into a cab in New York, a young man. He asked the cab driver whether he was a Muslim. The driver answered yes, and the young man slashed him with a knife. Who is this young man? He had gone to Afghanistan and made a documentary of a school mate of his who had joined the army, and was trying to promote his documentary. He was inebriated. He did this, but had never had any history of Islamophobia. The question is why did he feel he could act out this kind of frustration in anger and violence?

The American media is going to look for every excuse to make him a victim of his drunkenness and his media, but no one will make an excuse for a Muslim who does some

act. That person's a terrorist. The young man is being charged with a hate crime. Want to know my opinion? Want to know the best thing that could happen in this case? (The taxi driver forgives him). Absolutely! You could end the whole issue in New York (with the masjid). The man gets up on tv and says, "I understand this young man has been the victim of all this Islamophobia. He didn't mean evil, and in Islam we can either prosecute or forgive him. I forgive him, and I ask Allah to forgive him." That's the best thing that could happen. It would be the truly Islamic thing to do. That would shut at least some of these people up. But how will he do that? The driver described himself, "I have been in this country for 21 years, my children were born here, and I have never felt so insecure.

There are a handful of us who recognize this kind of prejudice and bigotry. We grew up with it. But some of you who grew up Christian in a Christian country have no sense of it. You feel nervous by it. You might feel, "Oh, I can avoid this and hide behind my background." Forget it; you can't hide. Embrace this experience with paranoia, and realize that some of us have been living with it since we were children. That's what brought us to Allah, and what brought us to Islam.

The person who worships Allah is attracted to Allah. If your *niyyat* is right, you don't become easily distracted by misunderstanding or misuse of the Dīn, at least not for long. You don't go looking to run and hide. It doesn't mean you have to stand up and make public statements, but you don't go run and hide. The truth really stands out from the untruth, as we are told in Qur'an. One sees the shallowness of the arguments against Islam or any essential religion. If you have established a relationship through your *niyyat* with Allah – with these qualities and attributes – that's the relationship with Allah who is where? Present. Divine Presence. Divine Essence. Then you see the shallowness of the arguments against Islam or against any religion.

If you have a personal, loving relationship with Allah (swt) – that is to say, you love compassion. You love mercy; you love tolerance; you love that part of yourself that can

feel that. You love that part in your brother, your sister, your child, your husband, wife, friend, neighbor. You love the part of the person that reflects those qualities. That's loving Allah (swt). When you love someone and overhear someone else criticizing that person, you get upset. You might get angry, but go beyond that. We have to go beyond that. You are able to say, "Look, you don't know that person." That is why making *takfir* is such a bad thing, especially during the month of Ramadān. "If you did know that person, you would see that they are not judgmental or harsh or this and that. They are not arrogant" (like you are) in parentheses, unspoken. You love that person and take the time to find agreement, support and encouragement.

One of the key elements in my own philosophy, which I've told you before, is that you try to find something you agree with in the individual. There may be 20 things you disagree with, but you hold onto the one thing you do agree with and you begin to talk about that. You find what's called common ground. Then you find out that it's really true. Common ground does lead to mutual benefit. That person continues to speak to you and with you, and you with them. You may not agree with everything, but at least you understand where it is coming from. More than that, it allows you to develop love. It's the same thing if you go looking through the Qur'an for things you disagree with, you'll never develop love for Allah.

These people who hate the Qur'an and want to burn the Qur'an on September 11, that's what they are going to do. Of course, the irony of that is, the best way to get rid of (old or damaged) Qur'ans is to burn them. We should all send our old Qur'ans and let them burn them.

You will never understand Allah; you will never develop love for Allah, and you will never understand what you disagree with. If you go through the Qur'an and find the things you do agree with, that you really like, when you come across things you have questions about you will think, "Hmm. That's really interesting. I just learned

something. I know a person who said that.” I don’t want to anthropomorphize Allah, but it’s sort of like a person you disagree with because you are looking to disagree, or a person you like, so you look for things to agree with because they happen to agree with what you believe. Well, we’re aliens and we are not people, *inshā’a-llāh*, I hope, who come with cultural hostilities or religious disagreements, or with ego.

It we take the time to make the right *niyyat* and see what is good; then we are going to ask the right questions and find the right answers. If you think you are missing something, if you are honest, you will go and study whatever you need to study. You will study the history, the *Sīrah*, the *tafsir*, the teachings of the *shuyukh*. You will ask questions of the *shaykh*. You will ask yourself questions, because you will be surprised how much you know. You know the answers to most of the questions you ask. It’s just whether you will make the *niyyat* to accept it or not.

You can understand what came before you, and understand what’s coming now, and the difference between the purity of the teachings and the impurity of the teaching. You realize when the rain comes down from the sky to water the plants, it’s also mixing with an awful lot of pollutants. It’s not just this pure rain that is coming down. It hits the ground and interacts with bacteria and other things and some of the bacteria is very hungry for oil, and eats it up. Some of the bacteria filters out the bad things, and the plants grow. You take the water from the ground and think it is filthy, polluted. But somehow the plants filter it, and get the best out of it on a very molecular level. They get what’s good out of it. We can do the same thing, even living in this polluted environment.

The teaching starts off pure. It came to Sidna Musa on the mountain unseen. It came to Sidna Isa when he was on the Mount, while his disciples were sleeping. It came to Prophet Muhammed (sal) in the cave and throughout his life. Allah (swt) is with you wherever you are. It doesn’t come down just because he is on a mountain or in a cave. It is proof that Allah (swt) is responding to a sincere seeker, the one who is ready to

receive. Not the one who says, “Well, I don’t know. Maybe, maybe not. I was more ready 10 years ago than I am today.”

Allah is with us in every circumstance. When we see the debates that are going on in the country, the voices being raised, and the real leadership being taken by Mayor Bloomberg and others that transcend party and politics, and goes to the core of the Constitution of this country, and to the core of human compassion and understanding, then we understand that we are not alone. You learn that you can turn to the people you respect, your companions. **La ikraha fiid deen.** Then you keep good companionship and it sees you through the rough waters. You come to the calm sea and you see all. The same sea that was so rough and tossing you around is so beautiful and calm right now. You make *munasabat* in your relationship. It goes on like that.

We go forward with the help of love and respect, and we take further steps and realize that our worship is not free from duality and doubts, even though we consider ourselves to be friends and companions and lovers of Allah and one another, and part of the *ummah* and the community of believers. We still have inconsistencies and expectations in our lives, of course. We have expectations of Allah. So we need to have some guidance to follow, and try to forget certain things. We seek to try to make the right *niyyat* and step into the world of unity. When one forgets about love as just being selfish, we step into the world of unity. Then our intention transcends our desire to associate our personality with just our own self, our own character. We seek something far beyond our own self, then the intention changes, and it deepens and grows, because there is more trust in it, more trust in our intuition. It is not to call our desire, intuition, but really know what that intuition is. We know what to renounce and what to follow. I’ll end with a quotation by Bayazid Bistami:

*First I renounced the world. The next day, I renounced the hereafter. The third day I renounced everything other than Allah. The fourth day I was asked what I wanted, and I said, "I want that I do not want."*

*Alhamduli-Llāh. Asaalaamu aleikum.*