Muraqabah, Muhasabah, and Mushahadah Part I

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Bismillaahi-rahmaani-rahmeem

Allahumma inna nasalaka mujibati rahmatika
Wa’aaza’ima magfiratika, wa salamata min kulli
Itmin, wal-ganimata min kulli birrin, wal-fawza bil-jannati min-a nnar.

Oh 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

There are certain attributes a person can develop which, when as they are fully
developed, help us to gains insight into what the purpose and reality of life is. As Allah
says in Qur’an, “Indeed, the lower self enjoins evil,” (24:21), there are two very distinct
aspects to a person’s character: the higher and lower self. The lower self draws us away
from realizing our own qualities. If we realize them, we can come to know the qualities
of Allah. We come to realize our own weaknesses, and Allah will show us where our
strengths lie. The way of the Sufi is to investigate exactly this line between what is creative and innovative, and yet still bonded very strongly to the Shar‘īah and the Sunnah.

We find that throughout history, Sufis have striven to awaken the heart to a deep faith, to see life as a path to be traveled, to seek guidance and study the system of life. There are signs that show whether an individual is awake and sensitive to life and to their spiritual practices. Similarly, a person whose heart is barely alive and who is distracted is really impervious to the signs and attributes that can lead one to clarity.

The Sufis say that to pander to the desires of an immature person is to give them what they want instead of what they need. When we give ourselves what we want, instead of what we need, it becomes the way in which we becomes distracted, and cannot progress. The warning that is given by the awliyā is not to occupy yourself with the things that are distracting or poisonous to your heart, but to occupy yourself as if Allah is the One Who is helping and assisting you.

“If Allah is your helper, none can overcome you. If Allah does not aid you, who else is there to give you assistance” (3:160)

This ‘āyat tells us that a person will be victorious in their life if they follow the guidelines and rules that govern both outer conditions. Hence, we need to know what our inner and outer conditions are. One of the ways for knowing our strengths and weaknesses is through muhasabat. Another ways is through munasabat, having a close relationship with someone who will reflect us, like one’s shaykh; and finally, through muhasabat (mediation) and tafakkur (reflection).

As we come to a unified state between our inner and outer, a unified harmonious place within our inner and outer state, then there is success. Success can happen on all levels in the physical world, in our personal lives in terms of our works or financial state, our relationship to others, and inwardly in our relationship to Allah and to ourselves.
One person this year said to me that as their “inner fast” they were going to fast from worry. I thought that was a very good choice, because there is some realization that worry causes both emotional strain and physical illness. Allah is the One Who assists us so that no one can overcome us, and if Allah does not assist us, who is there to assist us? The answer, of course, is that there is no one to assist us.

But to be assisted, we have to be able to receive that assistance. Many people pride themselves on the questions they have, the doubts they have, and the demands they can make of others to prove to them that the Path, the teachings, the Qur’an, and the practices are true. We have to realize that for every question, there is a true answer; but we have to have the ability to understand the answer that is given.

GOOD NATURE

During this retreat weekend I want to talk about the way you can be sure, sure you are going in the right direction, sure of your qualities (strengths and weakness), sure of the guidance of Allah. I will talk about the tools of muhasabah, muraqabah, and mushahadah. Ibraheem Al-Khawas said:

*Muraqabah is the sincerity of both the internal and external to Allah." And, "The best that man may cling to on this road to Allah is muhasabah (reckoning of the self), muraqabah, and governing his conduct with knowledge.*

I will begin today by speaking about muhasabah (accounting) because that is the foundation of every practice and the foundation of good character. A person who engages in muhasabah (accounting) is one who is striving to return to their true nature (fitrah). Through these practices a person can achieve sureness, can achieve fulfillment in life. (The term that is used by the Sufis is khuluq, which means one’s good nature,
temperament, or character.) For every Muslim, especially every Sufi, there should be a goal to be good-natured. It is a goal that can be attained by our will and by our submission, which is characterized by certain qualities of Allah that show us the way of acting in all circumstances.

It becomes easy for someone who realizes this good-natured-ness to also realize the Presence of Allah in their life. Anyone who is good-natured is one who is not so easily upset and deceived, or self-indulgent. The world khalaq (creation) and khuluq (nature) come from the same root. Khalaq relates to an outer form and appearance of the material world. Khuluq is directed toward the immaterial and what is meaningful, or the content of life. We all know that we should not judge or value someone only by their outer appearance. We want to know an individual inwardly, before we make any judgment about them, because the real identity of an individual lies in their character, their temperament, and their natural disposition. No matter how many different images a human being might project, there is a basic character and temperament that will tell us the truth about that individual.

As we make our muhasabat, especially during Ramadān, a time when we want to cleanse ourselves and begin anew, it is very important that we try to develop the kind of nature, character and temperament that lies at the root of our fitrah. “Truly We created the human being in the best form.” (95:4) And Also in Suratu-r-Rūm:

So turn your countenance (orient yourself) to the way of uprightness/purity/sincerity/truth, the very nature (fitrah) [ordained by] Allah to be the true natural way for the people. (30:30)

However, if we have harbored negativity for long periods of time, our character can be very hard to transform. Of if we have fears and doubts that have stood in the way
of making ourselves reach out to other human beings and be happy individuals, then that
too can stand in the way of our renewal. Where our outward appearance might be a little
deceptive or deceiving, our natural fitrah or disposition is waiting to be expressed.
Although it is usually referred to as good nature, it also has other implications to it: being
educated, sophisticated, and having good adab.

A mu’min has a strong identity, self-confidence, and is able to be humble when
they have knowledge and insight, not arrogant. He/she is able to listen to others, even if
they already know what the other person is going to say. A mu’min is able to have a
good spiritual life, one in which the inner goodness dominates the outer life. This is a
person whom Allah has really blessed with good nature. These are the characteristics of
a human being who will find real knowledge and real peace on this Path.

All around us, we find in certain Muslims, people who are so dependent on what
they believe is the law, the rules and regulations of Islam, that they do not see the
relationship between their character and attitudes and those guidelines, between the
Sharī‘ah and fiqh and their own natures. They do not see that to be effective, guidelines
and laws must be lived by choice and nature. But these people can tell you exactly what
to do, how to do it, what is right and what is wrong; yet they manifest hostility,
arrogance, judgmentalness, and bad temperament. Not only do they give a bad name to
Muslims and Islam, but they have little chance of experiencing their own fitrah and the
peace that comes with that.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INNER AND OUTER

There has to be a relationship between the inner balance and the outer, a
harmonious relationship between a person’s inner state and intention, and their
subsequent actions. Why else would Allah (swt) give us will, irada? So we know that
when intentions are bad, actions are bad. When one makes takfir, one has no concept of
tolerance and patience, or love. This is not the way of the Prophet (sal). When he was asked, “Which believer is better on account of his belief,” the Prophet (sal) said, “The one who is better in conduct.” That is not someone who is hostile and arrogant.

A person who is really a believer, one who has found harmony in this balance is a person who really has not only distinguished themselves in their humanitarianism, but they have distinguished themselves in their piety. They are true to their word, not in search of selfish interests, loving of others, a dedicated servant, content with what Allah has given, grateful. They have excellent character, which is the aim and goal of Prophet Muhammed. It was also his life.

When asked about the conduct of the Prophet (sal) by Sayd Ibn Hisham, his wife Aisha (ra) replied, “Do you not read the Qur’an? His conduct is the embodiment of the Qur’an.”

And the verse in Suratu-l-Qalam says of the Prophet (sal), “Thou stands on an exalted stand of character.” (52:04) A person who really sees does not make the same mistakes over and over again. The fact that the Prophet (sal) was so perfect in his conduct outwardly and inwardly, in the way he dealt with the material world and the immaterial aspects of creation and character, was a testimony to his progressiveness, to the possibility of how character and good-natured-ness can really create a pathway to personal peace and proper worship. The Prophet (sal) said:

The most perfect among the believers are the most perfect in conduct. A man can cross distances in conduct which he cannot cross with acts of worship and acts of adoration.

He said also:

The first virtue to be weighed in the balance in the other world is good
conduct.

With the perfect spiritual principles he brought to elevate people to the rank of perfect men and women, the Prophet guided his followers to realms where angels barely can move. All this has to do with good conduct and good character, having a good nature. The signs of a person who is good-natured are as follows: he does not hurt anyone with his tongue or actions (at least consciously and purposefully).

The Prophet said “Be just” to the one who pulled his robe from his back and hurt him; and to the one who threw dust on him, and insulted him; and for the one who slandered him or his wife. In fact, later on, when they became ill, he visited those people who had done those things, and he walked in their funerals when they died. He did so because he had a good nature, and he was blessed with his good nature.

There are ways of finding out if a person is good-natured. All you have to do is rub them the wrong way just a little bit, and see if they burst into flame. A person who does not have a good nature, all they have to do is be irritated a little, and then they spark like a big fire.

THE BASIS FOR MUHASABA

We recognize “bad-natured-ness” and we recognize good nature when we see it. What is the basis for creating this good nature in ourselves? Muhasabah. Muhasabah is assessing your actions and your nature. We should review what we say and what we have done every day. It would be wonderful if we could take a minute out of every hour and do that—it would be doing it at least 16 minutes every day. Muhasabat is not just to look at what you have done that is bad, wrong, or that you want to change. It is also an opportunity to thank Allah (swt) for the good that you have done, and to try to focus, hopefully, on the good things (not just the wrongs) that you have done, or the things you
would have done differently. But when you do come across those things you have done that are not right, you ask Allah to forgive you. Forgiveness is immediate because you have repented sincerely.

What is *muhasabah*? It is really an assertion of our loyalty to Allah. We are saying, “All the good that I have done has come from You, and the wrongs I have done I repent of. Please assist me.” You are affirming your relationship with Allah. In his *Futuwwah al Maqia*, Ibn Araby wrote,

*The righteous people at the early centers of Islam used to write down or commit to memory everything they did or said every day. Then they criticized themselves for any evil or sin in their words and deeds, in order to protect themselves from the storms of vanity and the whorls of self-pride. They also asked God’s forgiveness for that evil sin. They used to shelter in the quarantine of repentance against the viruses of errors and deviations, and prostrated in thankfulness to God for the meritorious deeds or words that the Almighty created through them.*

*Muhasabah* is a doorway to the *bātin*. It is a way of discovering your inwardness. It is a way of discovering one’s inner state, the environment of one’s *niyyat*, the depth of your spiritual self. We can exert spiritual effort, along with intellectual effort, to take a look at our inner state through our acts and thoughts. It is also a way to actualize the reflection on the Names and Attributes of Allah in our life; to focus on what the real, essential human values are; and to develop attitudes and characteristics in our character that will encourage the good actions and inward awareness.

Through this kind of effort, we learn how to distinguish between what is constructive and reflective of our *fitrah*, and what is destructive and a veil between our
fitrah and the Attributes of Allah (swt). Most human beings push the boundaries of constructive (opening) and destructive (constricting) [behavior] in their lives. But to really develop good character, a pattern (station) of constructive behavior depends on our effort and our will to look at ourselves; and to link what happens with what we said, what we thought, what we really found out was true, and what we did to what Allah guides us in Qur’an and what is in the Sunnah of the Prophet (sal).

It is through this process of continuous self-critique and evaluation that we are able to measure our present state, and prepare ourselves for the future. By looking at the past, we are able to walk confidently and humbly into the future. We realize there is a kind of moment-to-moment, hour-to-hour, day-to-day self-rejuvenation or renewal that takes place inwardly and bonds us to and cements our relationship with Allah. This happens because we have the ability, and we have made the choice to live a spiritual life in relationship to Allah and others. That is to say, we have within us what is necessary to look at our inner world. We try to preserve our spiritual nature, the nature of our soul, as we go through our human existence, keeping our inner senses awake and our inner feelings active in our lives.

PAYING ATTENTION TO THE INNER

Really, when we look around, we see that almost 99.9% of people are distracted and only pay attention to the outer world. I imagine that if you could find the common terminology and took a poll, the vast majority of people never think of their inner state, never contemplate an inner dimension in their lives. If, as Muslims and Sufis, we cannot allow ourselves to be indifferent to self-critique inwardly, then we also have to be able to critique ourselves in the outer, in the practical.

If we become very adept at muhasabah, then when fear and doubt come to us, when Shaytan brushes against us for a moment and troubles us, or longer, and places
doubt within us, our response will be to treat these doubts and questions as reminders of Allah’s Presence. Self-criticism becomes a light in the heart of a believer, *mu’min*. It becomes like a warning signal, like a good advisor in our own conscience and consciousness.

A real Mu’min, a real Sufi, is able to distinguish between what is good, what is *bidda* and *bidda hassana*—what is true, what is false, what is pleasing to Allah and not pleasing to Allah (i.e. what resonates with the System), what is good guidance and advice, and what is bad guidance and poor advice by that light that one has established in their own mind and heart through *muhasabah*. In another dimension, the whole process of making *muhasabah* is like a magnet that attracts the mercy of Allah. It attracts His love and His favor. I heard Sheikul-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah saying: "If you don’t find sweetness and joy in the deed you perform, then doubt its sincerity, for Allah is Shakur (Most Appreciative and Rewarding)."

The Divine Presence is always with us, but we can see it and sense it with the light of our heart. When you have the mercy of Allah coming to you on a moment to moment basis, an hourly basis, a daily basis, because you are performing the one action for the purpose of cleansing your heart, mind, and soul, you are able to go deeper and deeper into your faith and belief, deeper into your servitude, deeper into your knowledge and security. In other words, you are able to practice what is truly Islam, submission, and come near to Allah. (Realize *hādirī, nādirī, shāhidī, ma’ī*.)

You are able to find real happiness inside yourself because you are not able to fall into despair. The things that would make you discouraged and despairing are gone; you are giving them up. You have repented of them. Allah has forgiven you (in religious terms); but more than that, Allah has been invited to walk through your limbs, speak through your lips….

I hope through this description that I am giving you can see that *muhasabah* is not
just another thing you do. It is a way in which you take your willpower, your commitment, your discipline, your love, and the aspects of your good nature and your good intentions, and you make, through muhasabah, a permanent place within you where your faith is strong, your belief is strong, your character is strong, your actions are good, your personality is attractive, and your faith is answering many of your questions about your material state, your physical health and well-being, your mental clarity, and your emotional state. This is the power of muhasabah and tafakkur (reflection).

CONCLUSION: ON SELF-CRITICISM

Of course, it is difficult to be self-critical. But life is even more difficult if we do not reflect and criticize ourselves. If you want to live better today than you did yesterday, if you want tomorrow to be better than today, you have to be able to make muhasabah. Otherwise, we find ourselves, day after day, going through the same worries, the same doubts, the same issues over and over again, undermining our own mental and emotional stability.

Without muhasabah, we establish a pattern where the only answers we think we can find are in the material world—and the material world is not friendly. It is hostile. Have you looked at the news today? Is the material world friendly? It was not friendly to the investor today. It was not friendly to the innocent person in Afghanistan, Iraq, Darfur, or the millions of displaced people. It is not friendly to the person on the street who looks different. It is not friendly to the politicians. Who is the world friendly to? No one. I understand I am anthropomorphizing the world. But you understand: this is a hostile place. Where are you going to find peace, except inside yourself?

Surely in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest. (13:28)
So remember Me. I will remember you. (2:152)
The perfection of our belief comes about because you are polishing your belief, reprimanding one’s self, and criticizing one’s self, but you are also looking at what you have done correctly, offering gratitude. If we tell the real truth to ourselves, we will begin to see progress. On the horizon, there is a perfection: a universal part of each of us that is conscious and that transcends the limitations of the physical world and the physical dimensions of yourself. There is a moment, an An, a creative moment in our life where if we struggle with self-criticism and are honest about our goodness and good actions, there is a moment in which we will leave the limitations of this world, and will find our selves nearer to Allah—or rather, present with Allah.

As long as a human being shows such a degree of loyalty and faithfulness to Allah (swt) through this kind of self-evaluation and self-reflection, living our lives with a large degree of humility in each part of the day, then the doors of Paradise are open to us, even while we are here. Allah says to us, “Come, O faithful one! You have intimacy with Us.” This is the station of uns, intimacy. “We have found you a faithful one. Every day he is honored with a new heavenly journey in spirit.”

Allah says in the Qur’an, “I swear by the self-accusing soul.” (75:2) That is the pure soul. Each one of us, by making muhasabah very seriously, can become very quickly one upon whom Allah swears, and attests to His Own existence and His Own creation. Through accounting for ourselves, criticizing ourselves, and noting the goodness we have done and offering it to Allah, knowing that it comes from Allah, that can be the result. What an incredible opportunity we have.

I encourage you as we come to the close of Ramadān to take muhasabah very seriously. When I sit with you, and we make muhasabah, it is only to remind you. There is not enough time. If you can absorb this practice collectively, you will find the next step even more pleasing than you already find it, inshā’ā-Llāh. If there are some of us
who still have yet to find muraqabah very pleasing, you will find it pleasing.

Look at your character. If you can honestly say right now (and no one will ask you any questions) that you find criticism very difficult, either from others or from yourself, I bet you will find praise very difficult, too. I submit to you that you will see a relationship between your ability to criticize yourself and be critiqued, and your ability to praise Allah for the good that you do, and the fulfillment you feel in your practices. When you look, you will find a relationship between the ability to make self-criticism in a healthy way and your good nature. Asalaam aleikum.