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Khutbah



Title: [The Purpose and Meaning of a Life of Hardship](#)

DVD title: Hardships in Life can be Steps to Higher Consciousness

Opening *du'ās*. Allah the most High says in the Holy Qur'an in Suratu-l-Baqarah,

And surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger and loss of worldly wealth and lives and the fruits of labor. And give good news to the steadfast who, when they are visited with misfortune say, "Truly we belong to Allah, and truly to Him we return." Upon them rests the blessing of their Sustainer and mercy. And it is they who are guided. (2:155-157)

Allah (swt) also tells us in Suratu-l-Balad: **"We have created the human into a life of hardship."** (90:4) This word "*kabad*" is an interesting word. It talks about many things. It means hardship, but it also means to affect severely. It means to wear down or wear out, as in things in life wear you down. It means to cause loss, to endure, to suffer. Also *kabad* means interior, the heart or center of something. In the *'āyat* I quoted, Allah tells us that the people who are guided are the people who are patient and steadfast in their suffering in the tests and the trials. Those who are not guided we assume are the ones who are not [patient and steadfast in their tests and trials].

It is not necessarily, though it is possible, that you are born and you cannot be guided, while that person is born and can be guided. How one deals with the tests and trials of life is certainly a measure. This tells us that there is a dynamic to it; and that it is possible to change. The difficulties are a means of awakening the goodness in people. Those

people who are inebriated with arrogance, power, and desire for material success, as we see in the world today, are almost bereft of ethics. They have little or no ‘*aqīda* by which humane beings act humanly (or, I should say, human beings act humanely). They are seduced by their own souls, their own senses, and sometimes we find in some corners of the world the occurrence of some very unpleasant circumstances make people open to fundamental change, and fundamental developmental steps, which wrench the veils of ignorance and forgetfulness away, or, drop the veil of ignorance over the eyes of people. Economic loss, disaster, extremism, lies can work in both directions.

Inshā’a-Llah, we hope that everyone finds themselves guided to a path of some degree of moral and ethical perfection; a future that is more fulfilling, a future more fruitful than their present state. But there are people in whom misfortune and calamity have caused some profound inner transformation. You find often in life where moments of personal conflict and tragedy cause some permanent transformation in character, opening up means of communication and understanding. When we consider the deleterious effects of negligence, ignorance, and the intoxication that comes with arrogance on the one hand, and the innumerable moral and ethical lessons that can be taught by misfortune on the other hand, I think we can say that failure and misfortune are relative, insofar as they contain the possibility of some great blessing, and contribute to the building of people’s awareness, the strengthening of their character and of their will. At least that’s the way we should look at it.

It follows that if we use some rational ability that Allah (swt) has given us, that hardship should be a preliminary step to a higher and more advance state of consciousness and beingness. Hardship, severity, challenges, and even times when we are feeling worn down prepare us for a different level of reward or acceptance, and knowledge that awaits us. It compensates us for our potential change in our response to those difficulties, challenges, tragedies, and misfortunes, which may themselves change. It becomes apparent, whether or not we have attained to a high degree of sensitivity to the Divine

Presence, or whether we have developed a deeper degree of *ikhlas* / sincerity and *iman*/faith, and *ibada*/worship, or whether we have (because of difficulties, tragedies and severities and hardships, losses and misfortunes) sunk into a low state of helplessness, hopelessness and decay, [our response] will be determined by how we approach these circumstances.

Allah (swt) says in Qur'an, "**We have created man in the embrace of severity and hardship.**" This has very profound meaning. Without any doubt, Allah (swt) could have created this world or any other world without pain or misfortune, without hardship. But that would have meant that we would be deprived of our freedom of choice. We would have been let loose in the world as a creature without any will-power or decision, or with assigned roles like the angels, just like any other creature who lacks the kind of perception and awareness that Allah (swt) has given to human beings, and made us *inshā'a-llāh*, obedient and worshipful. We would have paid that heavy price of losing our innate capabilities and capacities, our innate freedom which really is the most basic and precious resource that we have. How can we make life meaningful? Life is about change and progressing.

In the Qur'an and in the Sunnah, we are enjoined to more toward knowledge and reflection. That's the life's work. "*Seek out knowledge from the cradle to the grave,*" the Prophet (sal) said. If that weren't the case, the world would have lost goodness and beauty without us moving in that direction, or having the capability to make choices. It's clear; the power given to us by Allah (swt) to distinguish and discriminate between good and evil, right and wrong, ease and difficulty makes possible the existence of these opposites in life, in beauty and in those things that are not so beautiful, by giving us these blessings of freedom and the ability to choose to be in that Divine Presence. Allah, Whose Wisdom is manifest in every aspect of creation, seems to be wishing to show us and illustrate to us His or the Divine Ability to create the phenomena we are witness to, and from which we can extract knowledge, wisdom, and power and guidance.

He places us within the possibility of doing both good and evil. Though we are enjoined to do good, and we are compelled (hopefully) to do good, we still have the choice. There is no doubt that the Divine expects us to choose good. There is no approval of evil; it is good conduct and righteousness that meets the approval of Allah. In exchange for that righteousness and goodness, He provides unimaginable support. Allah (swt) warns us against following a path of evil. We are threatened with punishment for those who need threats, or with torments for those who need that threat. By using the power of choice given to us by Allah, we also realize that Allah is compassionate, merciful, tolerant and peaceful. The threats and promises pale against the sense of fulfillment one gets from making choices that are good individually, good for the community, resonant with what is beautiful, good and constructive. We can conform to the Divine Guidance, and we can conform to our own conscience.

If on occasion, we slip and fall, and commit some wrong action, some sin, the door is not closed to us. The path remains open to us to return to that purity and light, favor and mercy of Allah (swt). This is, in and of itself, the greatest proof of the generosity, mercifulness and justice of Allah (swt), which He bestows upon us. Also, it is the proof that we, ourselves, can choose to change. If Allah (swt) was to give immediate rewards only to the virtuous people for their good conduct and acts, they would not be in any way superior to the corrupted and sinful people. Just imagine if the evil thoughts in our minds were always met with instant punishment and instant retribution, like some kind of massive psychological experiment, where if you do this you get zapped with electricity. We find in those experiments, which are probably still run in psychology departments at universities, that sometimes your best friends are the ones who give you the biggest zap. If there was instant reward and instant punishment, there would probably be no high value to virtue and purity—only a life of fear. There would be no sense of virtue.

To prove that, Allah (swt) tells us in the ‘*āyat* read earlier that, indeed, there is a principle inherent in life and in the creation of opposites and contradiction. It is the basis of this created world. It is what enables matter to change and evolve, so that the mercy and grace of Allah flows through this world like a breeze. Were things not to take on different forms and shapes; were there not change as a result of the mercy and grace and compassion of Allah (swt), as a result of one person encountering another, one circumstance encountering another circumstance; were it so that we were not able to accommodate new forms and changes, the differentiation and advancement of human beings would be almost impossible.

In this ability for the dynamics of change and growth, there needs to be error. There needs to be difficulties and hardships, not only to strengthen the character of the individual or test the character of the individual, but it is part of the reality that motivates us to change, to deepen our capacity. Everything I am speaking about today is the taking things off from the surface and going deeper. It is with these difficulties and challenges, through a loss of center and yearning to come back to center, that we do deepen our understanding, perceptions and capabilities. When tragic events take place, it strains the human beings, and strains our ability to conform to change. If we look at the news today, we see so much discussion about people who have to accommodate changes in *dunya*, whether from natural causes like earthquakes and floods in Pakistan, Haiti, and other places, or because of war. People have to accommodate change.

For some people, it is less difficult than others. For people who are extremely materially wealthy, and very secure in their material state, who feel very little challenge to their social or economic state, change comes very difficult. For people who tend to be poor, living off the land, having to accommodate many different circumstances in their lives, change is just another change that they have to accommodate themselves to. Beyond that, it’s a state of mind. One can be wealthy and secure, and have a state of mind of readiness. That can be developed by a sense of gratitude and humility, humbleness

toward Allah—that I have what I have by the mercy and the grace of Allah. If one actually thinks of themselves as undeserving or as a caretaker, perhaps then change may come a lot easier. The challenges, weight and hardships may be easier to live with.

I don't want to bandy words and twist language, but there are ironies in language. I don't think it is accidental that we call a person who brings the message of change a prophet. Though the words (prophet and profit) have no linguistic reality, they share a spiritual reality. It is possible that the investment of a certain amount of capital should result in loss, as many of us know from the stock market. But the constant motion of matter as a whole results in profit. In fact, it is good economic theory that you have to keep money moving, otherwise you will be punished by negative returns. The contradiction that takes place in the forms of matter results in the advancement of order to bring perfection. With all these disruptions, tragedies that we see and hear about around us, we can take the perspective that they are reflective of necessary change in order to move people to greater levels of perfection. This is, after all, what Allah keeps trying to tell us to do, whether in the Torah, the Injīl, or the Qur'an.

In some people's minds the question comes, "Why does evil (in the real sense of the word) exist in the world?" If you carefully look, you see that evil is not a pure attribute, it is a relative attribute. It's like saying, 'people kill, guns don't.' The course of nature can be looked at as a very mathematical way. The situation has been created to answer all of our needs, but not to fulfill all of our countless desires without encountering some difficulty. So we have to separate our needs from our desires. We want to fulfill all our desires without encountering the forces of nature that don't answer positively the limitless wishes we have in our hearts—wishes that, in most circumstances, are worthless from the point of view of what is essential in our nature. Nature, in other words, doesn't pay any attention to our desires, and refuses to submit to our wants.

When we encounter things that are unpleasant in our lives, we become unjustifiably upset and term the cause of our discomfort to be evil. There may be evil in that moment, but if someone wants to light a lamp and there is no oil for it, there is not much justification for cursing the universe because of that circumstance. Rather, we have to turn toward ourselves, and ask ourselves why left the lamp unprepared. “The last time I used the lamp, it ran out of oil. Did I think I would never need it again? Why did I put off filling it with oil?”

There is also responsibility with the things that try us and test us. We may not see the correlation in the moment. We might not take care of our health, for example. We may wait a long time, and then take care of our health, but damage is already done to our body. Then we can be spending the next 5 years taking care of our health. When difficulty comes to us, we think, “Why did this come to me? Look, I’ve been living a healthy lifestyle.” But we haven’t looked at the previous 20 or 30 years of our lives, because we only see what’s in front of us. When we experience difficulty, tests and trials, we have to remember, like Sidna Ali said, that the world is an abode of hardship. It is not necessarily a negative statement; it’s a very practical statement. It is connected to ease as we know: “**Inna ma’al usri usra.**” Even though we find ourselves in hardship, it doesn’t mean that there is always loss.

When you look at Sidna Ali’s life, he encountered all kinds of hardships and unpleasantness, but he constantly drew people’s attention to the justice of Allah (swt). Even if the justice is not seen in the moment, he was drawing people’s attention to the justice. Another thing we shouldn’t overlook is that good and evil don’t represent two mutually exclusive categories in the order of creation. Goodness is identical with being, and evil is identical with non-being, in the sense that whenever being makes its existence, non-being is also implied. We speak of poverty, indigence, ignorance, disease, and inequity, but we should not imagine that they have some kind of separate reality. Poverty is simply not having wealth in physical sense. Ignorance is the absence of knowledge.

Disease is the absence of health. Wealth and knowledge are reality. Poverty is nothing other than the emptiness or absence of those things. The cupboard is empty. The causes, however, are to be looked at differently. Poverty and ignorance have no reality except as they are defined in the terms of how one exists in this world.

The same is the case with the tragedies and misfortunes we tend to see as evil and the sources of our suffering. They are a kind of loss of identity. You hear people say in a tragedy, "Oh, I won't hear that person's voice anymore." Or "They won't be at the table any more." Or, "I was just talking with that person on the phone three days ago." We understand that sense of loss and suffering, a portion of our own identity is taken away. There is a loss of identity and nonbeingness that comes about, but we shouldn't associate that with evil. Something difficult happened, a test, a hardship came to us, a loss; but it is not evil. Aside from the fact that something that apparently existed moved from the realm of existence to non-existence means it is other than where we are in the moment, other than where our self is. But that cannot be called evil.

If calamities do not entail sickness and death, loss and the ruin of being, then preventing them from unfolding would not be so bad. But it's difficult. The loss that comes from such misfortunes and tragedies make us think that whatever exists in this world we have to question, "Is it good?" We question because we are unclear about our own destination. We have to have the strength of will and character that allows us to know that we are part of an unfolding, perfecting process. If we get that really settled inside of us, the difficulties that come to us will be handled much better. But we won't know until they come. So we have to prepare, in a sense, for the unknown.

We have to prepare for what we know may be coming, but we don't know how we are going to respond to it. Our practice of Tasawwuf we often talk about as the reflection of Allah on life. We see the reflection of the Nuri Muhammed. The shadow is created by the reality. If there is no reality, there is no shadow. If there is a reality and a shadow, it

means there is light. You can't see a shadow without light. If the light is in front of us, the shadow will be behind us. Things have existence by virtue of the fact that they are created independently and uniquely for us.

So let me end by saying what is real in all the circumstance we are experiencing, in all the decisions we have to make, in all the circumstances of hundreds of millions of people that are affected every day by external circumstances, foreign policies, economic situations, arrogance, war, in all these things that link people together, what is real in all this has to derive its being only from one place: Allah. Only those things and attributes that are real exist outside of our minds; everything else is relative and is created by our minds.

The world represents *ahad*, one unit, one creation. If we can struggle and force ourselves, like turning a flywheel, to take a circumstance and turn it back to the Creator of circumstances, to Allah; if we can take what happens, whatever hardship, struggle, calamity, misfortune, misunderstanding comes and turn it back to the center of our being where Allah resides in our heart, then we will be able to deal with circumstances much better. We will understand that the basis of our faith lies in that capability to embrace some of those difficulties in a way different than we would normally embrace them emotionally, *inshā'a-llāh. Asalaamu aleikum. Du'ās.*

We ask you Allah to send Your Blessings upon those who have passed in the week since last we gave *khutbah* and uttered these prayers. Lift up the souls of those who passed and bring them near to You as believers. We ask You for the children and adults who are ill in our community to heal them, and for all of us to gather in our hearts and minds and think positively and see the challenges before us as opportunities, and listen to our own words and turn the initial negative thought and words into positive ones. Let us see that You have filled our cup half full at least, and not look at the fact that it is half empty.

Amin.