

Alchemy of the Heart: Shaykh Muhammad Maulud

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This is an edited transcription of excerpts from the audio tapes of the course Shaykh Hamza gave based on his translation of Shaykh Muhammad Maulud's Matharatul Qulub: The Alchemy of the Heart. This class took place in Hayward, California in 1999.

Part 1: Shaykh Hamza's Preview to the Course

The Heart

Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* says, "On that day nothing will benefit the human being, neither wealth nor children, only the one who brings Allah a sound heart." A sound heart is one that is free of defects and spiritual blemishes. Though the spiritual heart is centred in the physical heart, the heart being referred to here is the spiritual heart, not the physical heart. In ancient Chinese medicine, the heart houses what is known as "*chen*" which is "a spirit." The Chinese character for "thinking," "thought," "love," "virtue," and "intending to listen" all contain the ideogram for the heart. In fact, in every culture in the world, people use metaphors that deal with the heart; in English, we call people who are cruel, "hard-hearted people." There is also the idea of having "a cold heart" and "a warm heart." People who do not hide their emotions well "wear their hearts on their sleeves." When deeply affected, we say, "he affected me in my heart" or "in my core." In fact, the English word "core" means "inner most," and in Arabic, the equivalent "*lub*" comes from the Latin word, meaning "heart." Thus, the core of the human being is indeed the heart. The word "courage" also comes from the same root word as for "heart" because courage is centred in the heart. The most ancient Indo-European word for heart means "that which leaps." The heart leaps or beats in the breast of man. For example, people say, "my heart skipped a beat" in reaction to seeing somebody. Many such metaphors are used for the heart.

Three Types of People

The ancients were aware of the spiritual diseases of the heart, and this is certainly at the essence of the Islamic

teaching. One of the first things the Qur'an does is define three types of people: the *mu'minun*, the *kafirun*, and the *munafiqun*. The *mu'minun* are people whose hearts are alive while the *kafirun* are people whose hearts are dead. The *munafiqun* are people who have a disease or a sickness in their hearts; thus, Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* says, "In their hearts is a disease, and they were increased in their disease." This is also in accordance with another verse: "When their hearts deviated, Allah made them deviate further." When somebody turns away from Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*, Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* causes them to deviate even further from the truth.

The Heart and the Brain

The actual physical heart in our breast beats at about 100,000 times a day, pumping two gallons of blood per minute, 100 gallons per hour, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year for an entire life time! The vascular system that sends this life-giving blood is over 60,000 miles long: it is more than two times the circumference of the earth. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the heart starts beating before the brain is formed; the heart begins to beat without any central nervous system. The dominant theory was that the central nervous system is what is controlling the entire human being from the brain, yet we know now that in fact the nervous system does not initiate the heartbeat. It is actually self-initiated; we would say, it is initiated by Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*.

The heart is the centre of the human being. Many people think the brain is the centre of consciousness, yet the Qur'an clearly states, "They have hearts that they are not able to understand with." According to the Muslims, the

centre of human consciousness is the heart and not the brain itself, and it is only recently that human beings have learned there are over 40,000 neurons in the heart; in other words, there are cells in the heart that are communicating. Now, it is understood that there is two-way communication between the brain and the heart: the brain sends messages to the heart, but the heart also sends messages to the brain. The brain receives these messages from the heart, which reach the amygdala and the thalamus. The cortex receives input from the amygdala and thalamus that it processes to produce emotion; the new cortex relates to learning and reasoning. These processes are recent discoveries, and although we do not fully understand them, we do know that the heart is an extremely sophisticated organ.

According to the *hadith*, the heart is a source of knowledge. The Prophet, *sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, said that wrong action is what irritates the heart. Thus, the heart actually knows wrong actions, and this is one of the reasons why people can do terrible things, but, ultimately, they are affected negatively. In *Crime and Punishment*, the brilliant Russian author Dostoevsky indicates that crime itself is the perpetrator's punishment because human beings have to live with the result of their actions: their souls are affected. When people do something against the heart, they act against the soul, and that actually affects human beings to the degree that they will go into a state of spiritual agitation, and people will use many ways to cover this up. This is what *kufur* is: "*kufur*" means "covering up." To hide their agitation, people use alcohol, drugs, and sexual experimentation; they also seek power, wealth, and fame, taking themselves into a state of heedlessness, submerging themselves into the ephemeral world which causes them to forget their essential nature and to forget their hearts. Thus, people become cut off from their hearts.

Wrong Actions Sicken the Heart

One of the things about being cut off from the heart is that the more cut off from the heart one becomes, the sicker the heart grows because the heart needs nourishment, and heedlessness starves the spiritual heart. When one goes into a state of unawareness of Allah and the *akhirah*, one becomes unaware of the infinite world in relation to the finite world, unaware that we are in this world for a temporary period. When we look at the infinite world in relation to the finite world, suddenly our concerns become focussed on the infinite

world and not on the finite world. On the other hand, when people are completely immersed within the finite world, believing that they will be here forever, believing that they will not be taken to account for their actions, this action in and of itself ultimately leads to the spiritual death of the hearts. However, before it dies and becomes putrid and completely foul, the heart will show many symptoms. These are the spiritual diseases of the hearts.

***Shubahat* and *Shahawat*: Two Types of Diseases**

There are two types of diseases of the heart. The first are called *shubahat*, and these are diseases that relate to understanding. For instance, if somebody is fearful of his provision from Allah, afraid he will not get his food for the day, then there is a disease in his heart because a sound heart has complete trust in Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*, and a sick heart has doubt. For this reason, a sound heart does not worry. It is then *afs* (ego), *shaytan*, *hawa* (caprice), and *dunya* (the love of this ephemeral world) that lead to this state of fear or of anxiety. The heart in it of itself is an organ designed to be in a state of stillness, but the stillness will only come about by the remembrance of Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*. The Qur'an states, "Isn't it by the *dhikr* of Allah that the heart is stilled?" This is what the heart wants: it wants to remember Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*. When Allah is not remembered, the heart goes into a state of agitation: it goes in a state of turmoil, and it becomes diseased because it is not being fed. Just as we need to breathe because cells need life-giving oxygen and if we stop breathing, cells die, similarly, the heart also needs to breathe, and the breath of the heart is the remembrance of Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*. *Dhikr* is what feeds and nourishes the heart. The company of good people is the food and exercise of the heart. All of these things are necessary for the heart to be sound and healthy, and this is basically the purpose of Revelation. The Qur'an has come to remind people that our hearts need nourishment. Thus, Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* tells us that the human being who will be in a good state in the next world is the one who brings a sound heart.

When we are born, we enter the world in a state of *fitrah*: the original inherent nature of the human being; then we learn to be anxious. We learn anxiety from our mothers, fathers, and society. Thus, the Qur'an says that the human being is created in a state of anxiety (*hala'*), and the one

group of people who are removed from this state of anxiety are the *musallin*: the people of prayer. This "prayer" is not the five daily obligatory prayers; rather, it is the prayer of people who are *always* in a state of prayer (*dhikr*); they are always in a state of connection with Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*, and this is the highest station. This is the station of people who are not diverted from the remembrance of Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* by buying, commerce, or anything else. They are the ones who remember Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*, as the Qur'an states, "standing, sitting, and reclining on their sides." These are the people who are not the people of heedlessness (*ghafala*).

The second type of the diseases of the heart is called *shahawat*, and these are the base desires of the self. For instance, food and sex are *shahawat*; they are appetites. These become diseases when they grow out of proportion from their natural states. In Islam, we have a method or a means by which our hearts can be remedied and return to their sound state again. The *dhikr* that the Prophet *sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam* did more than any other *dhikr* was "Oh Turner-Overer of the hearts, make my heart firm on your *deen*," and it is important that Muslims be reminded of this.

The Text: *Mat-hartul Qulub*

In Arabic, "*Mat-hara*" is *ism makaan* (a noun of place), and it means "a tool of *tahara* (purification)," and that is what *Mat-hartul Qulub* is. This text is the alchemy of the heart: it explains how to transform the heart. *Mat-hartul Qulub* was written by a great scholar, Shaykh Muhammad Maulud al-Musawir al-Ya'qubi from Mauritania. He was a brilliant scholar of West Africa who mastered all of the Islamic sciences as well as the inward sciences of Islam. He wrote this didactic poem in order to teach people the means to purify their hearts because he looked around and realized that everybody he saw had a diseased heart. Though he recognized the benefit in learning the abstract sciences of Islam, such as grammar, rhetoric, and logic, he felt that people may not have a great deal of need for that knowledge given the fact that on the Day of Judgement, the heart is the only thing about which we will be asked. The state of our hearts is the only thing that may benefit us because "actions are by intentions" as the *hadith* states. Since all our actions are rooted in intentions, and the place of intention is the heart, every action we do is rooted in our hearts. Thus, in reality when we are asked about our actions, we are asked about the intentions behind the

actions, and given the fact that intentions emanate from the heart, what we are actually being asked about is the human heart. When Shaykh Muhammad Maulud realized this, he said that suddenly Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* inspired him to write this text, and he based it upon many of the previous texts that had gone before, such as the last book of the *Ihya 'Ulumudin* by Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali.

Rectification Begins with the Self

If we look at the world today, the tribulations, the trials, and every war that we have, we will see that every bit of human suffering is rooted in human hearts. The reason people are aggressive against other people is due to diseases of the heart: covetousness, the desire to conquer, the desire to exploit other people, and the desire to steal their natural resources are all from diseases of the heart. A sound heart cannot commit such acts. Every murderer, every rapist, every idolater, every foul person, every person showing an act of cruelty has a diseased heart because these actions emanate from diseased hearts. If the hearts were sound, none of these actions would be a reality. Therefore, if we wish to change our world, we cannot go about it by attempting to rectify the outward; rather, we change the world by rectifying the inward because it is the inward that precedes the outward.

In reality, everything that we see outside of us comes from the unseen world. The phenomenal world emerges from the unseen world, and all actions emerge from the unseen realm of our hearts. Thus, if we want to rectify our actions, we must first rectify our hearts. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the famous American preacher and civil rights activist, said that in order for people to condemn injustice, they have to follow four stages: the first stage is that they must ascertain that injustices are indeed being perpetrated. People must point out the injustices, and in his case, it was injustices against the African-American people in the United States. The second stage is to negotiate: people must go to the oppressors and demand justice. If the oppressors refuse, then Dr. King said that the third stage is self-purification. He said that we must ask ourselves, are we ourselves wrongdoers? Are we ourselves oppressors? The final stage is to take action once we have looked into ourselves.

One of the things the Muslims of the modern world fail to recognize is that when we look at all of the terrible

things that are happening to us, we often refuse to look at ourselves and ask ourselves, why are these things happening to us? If we ask that in all sincerity, the answer will come back in no uncertain terms that this is all from our own selves. We have brought all of the suffering upon ourselves. This is the only empowering position that we can take, and this is the Quranic position. Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* says quite clearly that He places some of the oppressors over other oppressors because of what their hands were earning. According to Fakharudin ar-Razi's explanation, *radi Allahu 'anhu*, this verse means that whenever there is oppression in the earth, it is a result of other people's oppression. Thus, those people who are being aggressed upon are being oppressed because of their own oppression. However, this is obviously with the exception of tribulation. There are definitely times when the *mu'minun* are tried, but if they respond accordingly with patience and perseverance, Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* always gives them victory.

The Impure Oppress and the Pure Elevate

There is no doubt that the Prophet *sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam* and the *sahaba* were being oppressed when they were in Makkah, but Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* later gave them victory. Within 23 years, the Prophet *sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam* was not only no longer oppressed, he had conquered the entire Arabian peninsula, and all of the people who had previously oppressed him were begging him for mercy. Even though they deserved to be recompensed with punishment, the Prophet *sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam* forgave them, and this is the difference between somebody whose heart is pure and somebody whose heart is impure. The impure people oppress, and the pure people not only forgive their oppressors, they actually conquer them by the power of Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala*, and then they elevate them. This is what Muslims must recognize: the only solution to all of our problems is that we have to purify ourselves, and this is what *Mat-hartul Qulub* is about; it is a book of self-purification. If we take this book seriously, work on our hearts, and actually implement what we learn from it, we will begin to see changes in our lives, around us, and within our own family dynamics. It is a blessing that we have this book and that this teaching still exists in our community. All that is left is for us to take this teaching upon ourselves and to take it seriously.

Medicine for the Diseased Heart

If you use the techniques that are given by the imams, you will see results. However, it is just as the prescription that the doctor gives you: the doctor can only write the prescription; he can give you the medicine, but he cannot force you to take the medicine. It is left for us to take the medicine. The imams have given us the medicine: our teaching is there; it is clear; it does work; and we can change ourselves with it. If we do, Allah *subhanahu wa t'ala* has promised that we will be rewarded in this world and in the next. Thus, all that is left for us to do now is to go through these diseases and then set out to implement their cures *in sha Allah*.