

“PLAN NOT TO PLAN”

Lecture on the Text “*Dropping of Self Direction*” by Ibn At’Ala Askandari

Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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OPENING DU’A

Asalaam alaykum wa Rahmatullahe wa Barakatuhu

***Bismillah ar Rahman ir Raheem; al Hamdu Ilahi Rabbi Alameen ar Rahman ir Raheem; wa
salaatu wa salaamu alay Muhammad wa ala alahi wa sallim.***

***Allahummanfa’nee bi-maa allamtanee wa ‘allimnee maa yanfa’oonee warzooqnee
‘ilmanyyanfa’oonee.***

**O Allah! Benefit me by that which You have taught me, and teach me that which will
benefit me, and provide me with that knowledge which benefits me.**

***Allahumma innee as’aslooka khaira maa’aatee wa maa ‘af’aloo wa khaira maa batana wa
maa zahara.***

**O Allah, I beg of You the best of what I bring (commit) and of what I do, and the good of
what is concealed and what is apparent.**

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PLAN?

One of the most critical subjects one must strive to grasp and apply, as a Muslim and as a Sufi, is *tadīr*. In the text we are studying today, Ibn At’Ala Askandari writes about *tadbīr* (planning), with the hope and expectation, I believe, that we will give it deep and complete attention if we wish to have success in the journey to awakening to the Presence, the nearness of Allah (SwT). Moreover, he strives with examples and stories to make what apparently is difficult

for most people, to be easier to understand, vis a vis stories of the lives of saints, and those who have made great progress on the journey.

In my talk I will try to offer a way of understanding the subtleties and daily practical application of his teaching. This subject is of the utmost importance in terms of the realities of our outward purpose, and our inner goals. Each day, we balance the two aspects in *dunya*: to exist in reality and to sustain our awareness and our relationship with Allah Swt. The realities of *dunya* and the realities of the inner state call upon us to plan and accept Allah's plan for us. To plan, to organize, to design, to arrange, to bring about, to conduct, to manage: these are all meanings of *tabara*. *Tadbīr*, specifically, is to plan but it has many other subtle meanings reflected in such 'āyāt^s as those quoted in the first chapter of the Askandari text:

Fa-laa wa rabbika laa yu'minuuna h_uattaa yuh_uakkimuuka feemaa shajara baynahum thumma laa yajiduu fee a_nfusihim h_uarajam-mimmaa qad_uayta wa yusallimuu tasleemaa

But no, by Allah, they can have no real faith until they make you judge in all disputes between them, and find in their selves no resistance against your decisions, and submit with the fullest submission. (4:65)

And in Sura Al Qasas:

Wa rabbuka yakhluruq maa yashaaa'u wa yakhtaaru maa kaana lahumu-l-khiyaratu sub^ah_uana-Llaahi wa ta^caalaa^cammaa yushrikuun

And your Lord creates and chooses as He pleases, and they have no choice in the matter. Glory to Allah! He is far above the partners they associate with Him. (28:68)

And also in the Hadith of the Prophet (sal):

Indeed, he has tasted the sweetness of secured faith (iman) who is pleased with Allah as their Lord, and with the way of submission (Islam) as their religion, and with Mohammed (sal) as a Prophet. Adore Allah with contentment. But if you are unable to, then there is indeed great good in

patience with what you dislike.

These and many more statements, as we are told in this text, “*Dropping of Self Direction*” by Ibn At’Ala Askandari, direct us to the necessity of the abandonment of *tadbīr*, to the leaving of contesting, the leaving of resisting, and to the leaving of outright disobedience to Allah to the Divine decrees of fate. There is a saying, we are told by Askandari, “*Whoever does not plan for them self, is planned for by Allah.*” Shaykh Abul Hasan as Shadhili (ra) said,

If it is such that there is no other way of action than planning/tadbīr, then plan not to plan. Make no choice upon your own authority in anything. And choose not to choose. Flee from that choice, from the flight, and from everything to Allah, for your Lord creates what He wills and exercises free choice.”

CHOICE AND NO CHOICE

What does it mean to seek, attend, and obey the will of Allah? What does it mean to be in complete submission to His judgment? How does one begin to really know the decree of Allah Swt as it relates directly to one's own choices, plans, and necessities, beyond the philosophical to the Practical Reality of day to day life? In Qur’an it says:

Inna-lladheena yubaayī‘uunaka innamaa yubaayī‘uuna-Llaaha yadu-Llaahi fawqa aydeehim fa-man nakatha fa’innamaa yañkuthu ‘alaa nafsihī wa man awfaa bimaa ‘aahada ‘alayhu-Llaaha fa-sayu’tehi aj‘ran ‘adheemaa

And he (the Prophet) does not speak from his own caprice. Know, it is but revelation, Divinely revealed. So his order is the order of Allah. Indeed, those who make the pledge of allegiance with you make the pledge with Allah. The hand of Allah is over their hand. (48:10)

This ‘*āyat* illustrates the relationship between Allah and the Prophet (sal). We are reminded of what, as Muslims, we have been guided toward in our study and in our history. Our

model lies in the life of the Prophet (sal). We can see how the Prophet (sal) lived, what he did and didn't do, what he told people to do and not to do. We can understand how he dealt with everything from the life-threatening to the mundane commercial transaction. Do you think the Prophet (sal) planned how his life would play out? No. He accepted Allah's plan for him. Did he make plans and exert management skills? Of course he did!

What then is meant by 'not planning' and its reciprocal 'follow Allah's Plan'? To find out we have to develop certain qualities and understandings of our self and our capabilities. We have to find the clarity and the courage to unlearn certain behaviours and learn how to learn new ones, including new definitions. Then we can learn the essence of this text and message. We can find the comfort in living, planning within Allah's Swt Plan.

TRUST AND PATIENCE

True believers are not constricted, because the light of faith fills their heart until their hearts are expanded; filled full. Hence, a true believer (i.e. one who is true to their belief, not one who believes blindly) is a person who becomes fulfilled (i.e. becomes content and at peace by the *Tadbīr* of Allah Swt). Such hearts are made vast by encompassing light and knowledge, supported by the reality of the bounty of Allah, the *fadl* of Allah. If the light of a laser, created by the mind of a human being, can be programmed to place nano-dots under the membrane of a single cell before it splits, without harming the cell, then how can we question the subtle power and purpose of the light, *Nur- i-Allah*, and its function and purpose with regard to our transformation? We are given the possibility of 'seeing' and responding to the bounties and favors of Allah. Each day we are given the opportunity to see and respond appropriately to the *Tadbīr* of Allah.

Whatever plan we can create, as subtle and wise as it may ultimately be, is nothing compared to the Plan of our *Rabb*. Our choices must be in the realm of responding to the Plan of Allah Swt, and that is accomplished rightly only when we recognize that our lives are filled with the bounties and favors of Allah; only when we are ready to hear, attend to, and obey, the command of Allah; when we commit to obeying Allah, whether Allah Swt abrogates something we thought, or whether Allah Swt confirms something we think, Allah is not responding to our

plan, rather Allah responds to how we respond to His Plan.

The highest intentions and decrees of man are only a slight reflection of the decrees of Allah Swt. The decrees of Allah emanate from the *'ālam al amr*/the world of command to the *'ālam al khalq*/the world of creation, just as all things created by Allah's command respond to Allah in the language or form of their creation, beauty, majesty, and function. Any disturbance of this is disobedience to the will of Allah Swt. Whatever preserves it is an attestation and affirmation of the will and the *Amanat* of Allah Swt.

We are told in the Askandari text: *“When the decree has come down upon that person, and the lights emanate from him or her, that person is established by his Lord and not by himself. He is strengthened for his burdens and patient under his hardships.”*

What is it that helps us to carry out the command of Allah? What is it that helps us to understand that this situation in our life (whatever it may be) is coming from Allah Swt? What helps us to give up the whole idea that “I’m planning, I’m managing, and I’m the doer”? What is it that opens the gates of understanding? Simply put, the answer is **“trust,”** trusting in Allah over trusting in yourself, over the trust of anything or anyone; learning how to trust in Allah, without interpretation, without manipulation. So then the question arises, “What strengthens us in our trust?” It is witnessing the excellence of what Allah chooses for us, as opposed to what we choose for our self. Observe how Allah Swt manages, not how we manage, developing the ability to stand back and view the larger picture of our life, of life in general and the complexity of opportunities and experiences, the intricacies of the interfaces of the physical world with the subtleties of desires and human needs, and allowing the awesomeness and the obvious design to make its imprint on our hearts and minds. Seeing that we are a part of that Design, not a part of our design, liberates us from the egoistic idea and actions that excuse misconduct, faulty planning and management, and disassociated inharmonious goals that alienate us from the values of true belief and the virtues of an ethical life.

When we are in stress, we say in English: “I’ll manage.” It is very hard to understand that whatever the ‘I’ does is by the plan and will of Allah Swt. If we ‘manage,’ it is only by the

will of Allah. Only with that humility can we begin to accept our states, our role, our gains and our losses, moreover, our existence. With humility, we can move from an off-hand articulation of: “it all comes from Allah,” to attaining true belief and understanding that *that* truth is a journey of courage and submission, a journey of being patient, seeing what Allah chooses for us. Allah Swt does not choose for us what is *haram*. Allah does not choose for us what is destructive. Allah does not choose for us what causes pain to others, or what turns others away. Allah Swt does not choose for us the things that destroy our planet, or His creation. If you are patient and trust, you will see the Plan of Allah take form.

Askandari says, *“What strengthens us from carrying out the decrees is witnessing the excellence of what He chooses. What gives them patience at the existence of His judgments is the knowledge of the existence of His supreme knowledge.”*

And, *“What gives them patience with what occurs is their knowledge that Allah sees.”*

And also, *“What gives them patience at His decrees is their knowledge of what is deposited in them of His subtle Mercy and Kindness.”*

Hand in hand with trust is patience. What allows us eventually to submit to Allah and stop planning/*tadbīr*, even without Allah’s Plan being clear to us, is **patience**, patience and perseverance, along with the knowledge that Allah has deposited in each one of us His Mercy and His Kindness. Therefore, if we are not acting out of mercy and kindness, not only are we denying the favors of Allah, we are certainly not in the favor of Allah. That may mean nothing for 5 or 10 or 15 or 20 or even 70 years; but on your deathbed, it will mean something.

The human being’s sense of worth all too often is tied to the concept of ‘doing,’ ‘managing,’ ‘planning,’ and ‘accomplishing on my own, by my self.’ Yet reality tells us that all that is evanescent. Tragedy can strike, young or old; loss can and will come early or late; gain brings along with it the temptations of greed and lust and fear of loss. Yet we continue to ‘manage’ and ‘plan.’ Of course we shy away often from the topic underlying the acceptance of Allah’s plan and placing our plans within that. Instead, the moments of clarity that come when we see the magnificence and vastness of Allah’s creation and ‘plan,’ and how Allah ‘manages,’ ‘conducts’ the symphony of life, and demands of us right conduct are overshadowed by fear and

the ego that claims doer-ship and is self aggrandizing.

Rather than plan every minute, we must understand what it means to be a respondent to the Reality that *is* Allah in every minute. What it really means is to respond appropriately to the one or more of the Ninety-Nine Attributes of Allah Swt present and operant in every second of our existence, every circumstance, to respond to the moments rising and falling in our life, before our eyes, in our hearts, in our souls...the moments of compassion and mercy, of forgiveness and protection, of gratitude and justice, of peace and trust, etc., until we realize that we are responders.

MEDITATION AND REFLECTION ON ALLAH'S PLAN

Tadabur means reflection, meditation, thinking, consideration. If we keep this in mind we see that it reflects a different kind of planning—self reflective, internally consistent and founded; directed planning managing our life. The utmost plan, arrived at through our meditation and contemplation, thinking and consideration and reflection on what is directly before us allows Allah's plan to come emerge and be seen, felt, sensed in our daily life. Most students invariably ask: “What does this mean, Shaykh, that we never make any decisions; we never plan?” No, it doesn't mean that at all. Of course, as I said earlier, every day we are making decisions and planning. But do we ask and seek to truly understand in the context of what and why? Are we making those decisions in the safe context of what Allah would have us do, in the safe context of what the Prophet Mohammed (sal) did, in the safe and secure context of our *fitrah*; or in the context of being good, kind, patient, loving; or in the context of Trust? Or are we planning in the context of being selfish and impatient, worried about career and money, striving for power or only personal material security; wanting this now, right now; trying to control time and place and circumstance?

Think of it in this way: Just as our bodies respond to light and heat and infusion of food and water, to viruses and bacteria, to toxins and nutrients, naturally and in harmony with the 'plan' of life, within us are perfect examples of the cohesive and operant Plan of Allah Swt in our physical and mental, emotional systems. Think for a moment about how submission to those involuntary systems is necessary for us to live; and hence are created to be automatic, out

of our control, but not out of our influence. We could not sustain our life if these processes were controlled by our choice; although we can choose to abuse our self and degrade and eventually destroy those systems. Or we can help to sustain their balance and harmony by making plans, choices, managing our environment, our food, our breath in support of their perfectly created and purposeful intention of Allah Swt. We can, in small and larger ways help our self to fulfill the will and Plan of Allah Swt.

Reflect again on this analogy; it is a *mithal* (symbol/example) of the Divine Reality. Our hearts beat, our lungs breathe, our stomach digests, and all the miracles of the body that keep us alive every second, [are] only at the will of Allah. And yet, we can plan and control what we put into our body, how we treat it, if we exercise, take our vitamins. If we are ill, we can stimulate the immune system to heal itself, but it is the body that does the real healing by the Plan and will of Allah Swt. So too, we can control and plan how we respond to Allah's Plan; but it is ultimately His design. Ultimately we will realize that this creation and all its operations are the metaphors and analogies through which we can understand and accept Allah's Plan and how our planning must correspond to it.

Allah says, **“And you have no blessing nor favor except that it comes from Allah.”**

Askandari writes: *“And never will the existence of His favors and blessings leave you. If you seek an explication of your evolving of your stages and states in life, then listen to His saying. He said:*

We created man from a quintessence of clay, and then We placed in it a drop of sperm in a place of rest, firmly fixed. Then We made this sperm into a clot of congealed blood, and then that clot We made into a fetus lump. Then We made out of the lump, bones and clothed it with flesh. Then We developed out of it another creature. So blessed be Allah, the best of creators. Then after that length, you will die; and then on the Day of Resurrection you will be raised back. (23:12)

That's the *Tadbīr* of Allah, Allah's Plan. So which of His favors do you give thanks for, and which of His bounties do you mention? Know that a person who wishes to arrive at Allah

should enter the door by the means Allah has provided. The most important of these is that he or she should purify himself and herself of the existence of their own planning, and contesting the will of Allah.

LIGHTING THE WAY

How do we know what is the will of Allah, what illuminates *His* Plan for us? We say “I don’t see how this or that is going to happen.” That’s right, you don’t see it; Allah sees it. We are in darkness and cannot see Allah’s Plan, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a plan. What we do in darkness is not what we would do in the light. What we do in the light would be something totally different. Spiritual light allows us to carry what we understand forward.

Tadbīr is very intimately linked to the ego, because it is about planning for yourself versus planning to reflect the will of Allah, and accepting the planning of Allah. To understand the will of Allah, and have a reason to carry that will forward, takes real courage in life. That’s real independence and proof of your self control. That’s a builder of real self-esteem. It’s based on the ability to accept Allah’s *tadbīr*. It’s building your life, your future, your spirituality on something that will last, not building your house on sand, as it says in the Injīl. Planning for, or with, the will of Allah is not anthropomorphizing Allah Swt, rather it is planning fully with the affirmation, intention and actions that reflect the Divine Attributes that are the reflections and aspects of Allah’s presence within and around us. Thus, to respond to the Plan of Allah is to respond e.g. with true Compassion, or Mercy, Forgiveness and Justice, Tolerance and Perseverance, Trust and Love etc., as Allah Swt responds to us, as is exemplified in the life of the Prophet (sal). Respond naturally, not pride-fully; transparently, not conditionally, referencing Allah and *His* revelation, and the Prophet (sal) not oneself; living in the light of Allah.

Real lights open the world of the *‘ālam al amr*/the world of command to us and let us see that what is truly near to us that is real. Spiritually, that means the presence of Allah Swt revealing to us what is real—not the reality we want to create, or the reality we want to think is real. The problem of course, as you know, with what is real is that sometimes it is painful and difficult, challenging, and filled with tests and trials. That is why *tadbīr* is often linked with patience; patience with Allah’s command, patience with Allah’s will and the Plans of Allah.

When we see what is near to us, and what decrees and knowledge come directly from Allah through the Prophet's hadith or exemplified in his life, and through the teachings of our *murshid* or *shaykh* then our life experiences becomes a means of understanding, and we see that Allah is training us through patience, through perseverance. Allah says to us, **“Have patience at the command of your Lord, for you are verily in Our eyes.”** (52:48) The eyes are the organs of light. The eyes are the means through which we see what has been illumined.

Even the hardships come from the Most Compassionate One. That is difficult to remember and to accept – that the hardships, trials and difficulties come from the One Who is Ar Rahmān, and Ar Rahīm. So we have to try to look at them in the sense of what Allah's purpose is for us. Allah Swt never ends our choices. Choice is the unique gift of Allah Swt to human beings, beginning with Hazrat Adam (as). We are making choices all the time.

At some point you realize that, as much as you haven't accomplished what you want to accomplish in *dunya*, that too was the Plan of Allah, to get us to the point where we would choose to live our lives spiritually, to turn our attention to spirituality and to Allah's Plan, not our plan. One could say to Allah: *“the suffering of the tribulation is lessened for me because of the knowledge that it is You who is decreeing this trial for me.”* (Askandari) And that would be a wonderful thing to be able to say; to say: *“O Allah, I have this tribulation, this loss, this grief, this financial need, (whatever it is) but the pain of it is lessened for me because it is You who have decreed this for me.”* There is for no substitute for what Allah has decreed. There is nothing one could choose that would be better than Allah's choice.

Let us think of it this way. Askandari tells us a story: *“Someone enters a dark house, and was struck by someone in the house, but didn't know who it was that hit him. And all of a sudden, the light comes on and he sees it was his Shaykh or his father or his teacher who had struck him. The knowledge he has of those people would cause him to be more patient and understanding in that circumstance, than if it were a stranger or enemy”*. If the challenge, pain, suffering, trial, and test come from someone you respect, and you know has the best intentions for you, you will deal with it differently than if it comes from someone you don't know, or who is your enemy. Knowing the source of the hardship, we try to gain understanding, just as we should know that the tests and trials come from Allah.

He says, “*If it is Allah Swt who sent this decree upon His servant, and opens the door of his understanding concerning that decree, then know that Allah willed to carry it for him. And it is by the virtue of the fact that the true understanding returns to Allah, urging and inciting you toward Him, making you depend on Him. ‘Whoever places his trust in Allah, He will suffice him.’*”

TRUSTING IN THE PLAN OF ALLAH

Through trust, we understand that these trials and tests come out of the love of Allah. Because, if we learn trust, we create the foundation not only for successful human interaction, the tolerance for the vicissitudes of life, the character for fulfilling the Trust/*Amanat*, but more important, the basis for facing the transition from this world to the next—indeed even believing in the hereafter—because we have seen the reality of the plan for this world and our life. To learn that lesson, there has to be this stress and strain over trust. Few people in the world take the time to understand it. That’s why we trust to a degree, and why we find that beyond that degree, a person is generally only out for him or her self. But Allah Swt comforts and consoles us when we are attacked by difficulties, when we are distracted by our *nafs*, when we lose our discernment and discrimination, and we wander astray. How does this consolation take its form?

Our consolation is that which comes to us from the subtleties of the Rahmat of Allah, the favors of Allah, the *fadl* of Allah. It comes from our core human nature to submit, and our inherent communal nature to keep the company of others. Our choice, thus, must be to keep good company, pious company. There was one Sufi *shaykh* who was ill a lot. Much to the surprise of his followers, he prayed to Allah that his sickness not go away. Because the sickness, he saw, was the *madad* of Allah, the assistance of Allah. With the sickness came opportunity. Through that illness and suffering, so many questions came; so many compensations had to be made; so many understandings had to be developed in him; so much *muhasabat* had to take place; so much questioning, beyond the ‘why me’ kind, which allowed him to understand the nuances and subtleties, unveiling unseen reasons. It became obvious to him that this illness was a great blessing to him, and that he wasn’t able to see these things without it.

We have to realize that whatever our current struggle or challenge is, it is giving us the

opportunity to turn our attention more toward Allah Swt; it is a situation in which we have to seize the moment. Each hardship and challenge gives us the opportunity to develop the ability inside our self to turn the attention away from the *dunya* and toward Allah Swt. Why? Because Allah has turned you away from *dunya* for a period of time. A lot of people turn more toward *dunya* when faced with hardships. We say “Gee, I don’t have any income! I don’t have this or that! My business is not doing well, I don’t have any clients! I better put more time in at work....I need a better plan....” But your compensation for that is to turn toward the One Who planned it for you. If you don’t do that, and you keep planning for yourself, those lessons keep getting harder and harder, and time runs out.

But remember that **the Messenger of Allah (sal) once saw a mother, and said to the Sahabah, “Would this mother throw her child into the fire?” They said, “Of course not.” So he replied, “Allah is more merciful to His believing servant than a mother is to a child.”** He decrees for you these sufferings because of what is in them of rewards, benefits, and blessings. Allah says in Hadith Qudsi, **“Those who patiently persevere will truly receive a reward without measure.”**

And, as we were told by Shaykh Abul Hasan as Shadhili (ra), *“Know that if the Real deprives you, He does not deprive you out of stinginess or niggardliness, but rather out of mercy to you. Deprivation from Allah is a gift, but no one understands the gift in the deprivation but the utterly sincere individual.”*

How high a regard our predecessors held this concept! In the Hikam of Askandari, he wrote, *“The pain of trial is lightened for you by the knowledge that it is He who is trying you. For the one who confronts you with His decrees of fate is the same One Who accustoms you to His good choice.”*

So, try to accept what your duties are. Remember the subtlety of what I have said about planning: it’s not that we don’t plan. We do strategic planning. We do business planning. We plan for tomorrow. We have a ‘to do’ list. To deny the efficacy of this teaching of Ibn At’Ala is a product of the *nafs*’ reluctance to understand the foundation of Islam, or *taslīm*/surrender, and trust. Abandon rebelliousness by examining oneself and applying this guidance. Move to the higher states of *nafs* and arrive at the station of contentment and *khawf*. It’s not that simple. It’s

the context in which our content is planned. We think that if we are just altruistic, that's sufficient. If we are egalitarian, that's sufficient. But that's all *dunya*, and that's going to pass. It's what you do underneath that, how you do it, who it is who does it, which is much more important.

Ask yourself: What is the test and trial I have? How will I distract myself, convince myself, or manipulate myself and my situation? Or how will I turn to Allah and know spiritually what is the right thing to know or say? What is my real responsibility as a Sufi, as a Muslim, as a believer? What should I really choose to struggle with out of all those things—the stuff that I'm planning, or what Allah has put before me? Remember this from Ibn At'ala:

We have now established that the praiseworthy ceasing of Tadbīr does not consist necessarily of leaving the secondary causes of the world (asbab ad-dunya), or neglecting to consider the means towards the well-being of one's worldly life, or aiding one in obedience to the Master and working for the sake of one's hereafter ... Rather, the Tadbīr which is forbidden concerning this world is the Tadbīr in it for its own sake, and the sign of that is: that one disobeys Allah Swt because of it, and that one takes it however it may be, whether permitted or not. (p.72)

THE MUSIC OF TADBĪR

Insh 'allah, from our contemplation of *tadbīr* and *khawf*, and the past seminars on *ala'a*, *nai'ma* and *fadl*, we are coming to a conclusion that there is a big difference between doing what “I am supposed to do” and *choosing* to follow Allah, and plan the Plan of Allah Swt. These topics can put the ego, the *nafs ammāra*, and its machinations into real focus. If we approach them with real *ikhlas*—not defensively, not dogmatically, not reacting to our own personal historical experiences of ideology or religion—and if we try to understand the kind of orchestrated chords and instrumentation that Allah Swt has provided for us to create a harmony of understanding and existence, to bring us to different experiences and *maqam*/stations, we begin to understand why this term *maqam* is used both in music and Sufic teachings, stages.

If we understand how Allah has blended the physical world with our emotions and perceptions, our abilities to perceive and feel, we begin to clearly see how our ego, our *nafs ammāra*, is an irritant and stands in the way of the ease . It stands in the way of understanding

the challenges that come when we are following the *Tadbīr*/Plan of Allah Swt. With insight, we begin to see how gross and how disruptive that *nafs ammāra* is, how dissonant, how it creates a cacophony in our mind and in our soul. When we begin to see the subtlety, we begin to understand ‘why.’ We begin to have at our command the millions of colors that Allah provides for us to color our life with, to tint the moment with (or, to return to the musical analogy: the quarter tones, instead of just the whole notes). The subtleties of what once would be dissonant to our ears become consonant and blended, harmonically reflective. What Allah has planned for us (which is sometimes difficult to understand and painful), in the course of the whole *maqam or dastgah*, we find it means something; we see it in another form, another image.

How do we arrive at that understanding other than through some kind of intellectual acceptance of it? We arrive at it the same way we arrive at any understanding, any clarity: through *ikhlas* (sincerity), *niyyat* (intention); and Islam, *taslim* (through submission and learning). We know when the ‘tone’ is right. Just like we say, “It’s not what you said but the tone of your voice that gave different meaning to the words that you uttered.” Just as in the heart of the poet, the *maqam* and the *kanun* or the *setar* or the *tar* translates immediately into words.

The actions of an individual, we say, speak louder than words. No matter what words we say, it is the rhythm of our life, the choices and the plans that tell a lot about the state of mind or mindlessness, hope or hopelessness, need or helplessness, humility or arrogance of the individual. That’s why this *tadbīr*/planning is such an important subject. It’s not just about saying, “Oh, I’ll just follow what Allah has planned for me.” The life, words, choices of the individual creates a form. They create and enable a *maqam*. If we’ve achieved a state gifted by Allah to us in the moment as a *hal*—a moment of sweet gifting—we become comfortable with that state. We become comfortable with the placement of Allah; albeit, it may be painful or confusing, or it might not be what we planned for our self. But we give up to it. This is a very, very important discipline: to trust in Allah. It pervades life. It is ingrained in the human being who makes a sincere choice based on belief, and submits and surrenders, to accept the plan. The rest of us think we can argue it, and lawyer it, and whatever we want to do with it. But there is a difference between just blind faith and illumined faith.

NIYYAT AND RESPECT

Finding the Plan of Allah Swt enables us then to hear the celestial music, if you will, to be touched by a word or a phrase, to understand the relationship between the tone and our emotion that Allah has placed in us, to respond accordingly with respect to what the need is. It has to do with *niyyat* and your sincerity. All that we are talking about, in this text of Askandari, in this text as in Qur'an, all is built upon a foundation of *niyyat* and respect, accord and listening. Remember he said: “*Know that things become praiseworthy or blameworthy according to what they lead to.*” (p.74) And we know from the Prophet (sal) that actions follow intention. Allowing the core of our humaneness to respond, and respecting and using it honestly, whether it is to our liking or not, is the means to fulfillment. So, “*The dropping of self-direction...isqat at-tadbīr does not involve completely leaving the worldly means ...*” (p.75) Askandari does not let us run away from the reality of submission (i.e. Islam); rather he forces us to confront our self, our life, our relationship with Allah Swt, and ask the hard questions and develop the subtlety of hearing and seeing and understanding .

In so doing, we assure that we are not like those who are described in Sura al-Araf:

Wa laqad dhara'naa lijahannama katheeram-mina-l-jinni wa-l-'iñsi lahum quluubul-laa yafqahuuna bihaa wa lahum a'yunul-laa yub^añiruuna bihaa wa lahum aadhaanul-laa yasma'uuna bihaa ulaaa'ika ka-l-'an'aami bal hum adallu ulaaa'ika humu-l-ghaafiluun

“...They have hearts but they don't understand with them; they have eyes but they don't see with them; they have ears but they don't hear with them. They are like livestock except that they are further astray. They are heedless.” (7:179)

We have to learn the hard lesson of respect for the responsibility we have, whether we planned it ourselves or it was given to us by our parents—respect [for] the capability we have, whether or not we want to use it or pretend it is not there; respect [for] the patience and perseverance that comes from Sidna Adam and Hawa (as), and emanates from the core of our

being. Understand that when Allah willed that they eat of the fruit of that tree, it was part of His plan; He didn't abandon them. He provided a means for them to find Him by their choice, and He enabled their choice. Read carefully chapter 4, pg.32 -36. Understand what we choose is happiness or misery.

If we allow a harmony to build between ourselves and nature, between ourselves and the other expressions of Allah's love, my 'I' becomes totally absorbed in 'Thou.' Who understands this? Only the ones who really love Allah and who submit to Allah, and trust in Allah and His Messenger, and His *anbiyā*, and His *awliyā*, and His *shuyukh*. Because in them you will see absolute responses to that love, that emotion, that music; you will hear and see the *maqam*. The vulnerability is clear. Sidna Musa (as) had his doubts. Sidna Ibrahim (as) had his doubts; you saw his vulnerability when he was told to slay his son. Sidna Yusef (as), Sidna Yunus (as), Nūh (as), Yahya (as), Isa (as). You see clearly in their lives their vulnerability and their struggle to follow the Plan of Allah and not their own plan.

Prophet Mohammed (sal) had to see his followers destroyed by their faith. They were being beaten, humiliated, cast out. All of that vulnerability was in public. Following Allah's Plan would be easy if you could say, "I'll just do what I want when I want." But Allah tells us this is *shirk*; it is choosing your own choices over Allah's choices, comparing your knowledge to Allah's, your insight to Allah's insight.

Don't create the form and try to push real life into it. Trust in creating the right *niyyat* and trust in Allah. Take your knowledge and experience in what you have been given and trained and schooled in, the highest values of those you love: your parents and guides and teachers, and allow that to create the form. Because the actions of the hearts are the intentions, and from them come all of the outward acts. If the heart is allowed to be corrupted, the outward acts will be corrupted. The acts of our heart and subsequent actions of our limbs really need to be in harmony with the will of Allah. If the foundation of our life is perfected, then the action of our limbs will be perfected, and our tongues will be perfected. But if our intentions are neglected, or if they are formed by the *nafs ammāra* in order to get what we want, then our outward actions will cause all kinds of upset and destruction. This is true in both a worldly sense or in a spiritual sense. Wrong begets wrong. It goes against the moral and ethical fiber of human beings. When

you see something that is clearly wrong, going in the wrong direction, self-destructive, disruptive; going against the core of their teaching, their being, or their spirituality, it can only create more wrong.

That's why Allah's Plan is the better plan. Allah may give us difficult things, but the bigger picture is for the good. Allah's Plan is to teach us about humility, about love, about trust, about obedience, about surrender. Who is to say, "I've done this long enough. I've heard that enough times," or, "Don't call on me to do this again." Who is to say but Allah? Any of us who have lived past 40 years know the cycles of life. We have experienced them. If we want success, and we want to rectify the wrongs in the world we live in, and we want rectification of our own inadequacies, then we need to perfect our intention and our goals, whether they are small ones or large ones. It is in this way that our small actions grow into big deeds, and how our actions, our limbs, and our trusts are sanctified.

We can learn that our *niyyat* can have amazing and profound results. Good intention is the initiator of all things good. And for this purpose of putting our hopes and aspirations to work, to understanding, [it] will cause comprehensive results from the Divine will of Allah Swt, from the *nai'ma* of Allah, the *fadl* of Allah. We can see the blessings and bounties of Allah Swt. Our desired goals will eventually manifest, but only in relationship and accordance with the strength and weakness of our will, our *irāda*, and the clarity of our *niyyat*. So it's very important that as a human being, we need to be very serious about our life, not flippant, not arrogant, not thinking we have all the time in the world—not to be heedless, but to be heedful.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let's pause for a moment to contemplate the secrets of *niyyat*. Intention can have far more effect than you can even realize. There is a story: *Umar Ibn Abdul Aziz became Khalif. A shepherd said, "Who is this pious man who has taken charge of the people?" It was then said, "And what knowing to you have of this?" And they replied, "Whenever a just Khalif takes charge of the people, then the wolves leave our sheep alone."*

Read the signs of who you are. Look into your own life, into the lives of your loved ones, your family, your friends. What are the choices? What are the intentions that are being

made individually, collectively? These are very, very important matters, true for both the negative and the positive intention. If human beings justify evil and their intentions are bad, more evil will come from it and be born from it and spread, even though it wasn't their initial purpose. Look at the war, the endless war.

These are very subtle matters we should think over deeply and encourage each other, and our loved ones, to think deeply about, using the examples of our own life and the life of the world—not only philosophically, but personally. To plant these principles in a human being's heart, so the human being can preserve their heart from evil and corruption is *sadaqa*. It is the will of Allah. When a person enters into an act of trust and obedience, whether it's *salat* or *tasbeeh* or reading Qur'an or *zakat* or *sadaqa*, or visiting the sick or attending to the funeral or acting out of worship or engaging and serving their beloved, or fulfilling their duties and responsibilities, they won't engage in anything that is forgetful or heedless. Allah asks us to remember Him and He will remember us. This is living in the plan of Allah Swt. Managing our life by His Will will come naturally. Whoever mentions Allah Swt in a state of heedlessness, Allah will turn away from. Whoever mentions Allah in a state of remembrance, Allah will run toward them.

I will end today with a quotation from my Shaykh, Hazrat Azad Rasool (ra):

I ask only one thing from my students, and nothing else, that please you try to surrender your will to the Will of Allah. If you can do this, you will receive something good. Always there is a conflict between your will and the Will of Allah. If you can reduce this conflict, you surrender yourself to the Will of Allah, and take it for granted then that you have realized the Almighty to a certain extent. You will be happy more and more. This is the secret, I think. If you can do this, you will attain the goal. You don't have any kind of thought or will or wish, but you surrender to the Almighty. And what comes from Him you accept, bad or good, or this, as something coming from the Beloved. God is One: I only ask one thing. Every time you see you make a promise and you are not able to accomplish all these things, you are having a conflict with the will of the Almighty. So make an

(intention) and be willing to accept what comes from Him.

CLOSING DU'A

Allahumma a'innaa 'alaa dhikrika wa shookrika wa hoosin 'ibaadatika.

**O Allah! Help us to remember You, to be grateful to You,
and to worship You in the best way.**

Asalaamu aleikum wa Rahmatullahe wa Barakatuhu.