

“What You See is What You Get” Part I

Lecture on the Hikam of Ibn Ata’ala Askandari at the Zawiya of Shaykh Nooruddeen Durkee

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Opening Du’ā

Ya Allah! Wa Ja'al llahumma l'hijabu l'a'dhama hayata ruhi kashfan wa 'iyana idi l'amru ka'dhalika rahmatan minka wa'hananan.

Oh Allah! Make the great veil the life of my spirit by unveiling and eye-witnessing, since the order is like this—a mercy and kindness from You.

Introduction

In trying to understand and apply the hikam of Ibn At’ala Askandari, it is important that we realize that we are dealing with the distillation of the insights (*basīra*) of a unique and extremely refined Wali. In this text he is guiding us to find knowledge, wisdom, and comfort, and admonishing us to find the inspiration for change in the essential relationship between our self and the *nur i Mohammed*. The authority of Ibn Ata’ala to the seer is self-evident; what he writes is not mere philosophy, but a subtle balance between inner and outer realities; an example of one who seeks perception and personal comfort in the Divine Presence.

We find also in this text that to love the Prophet Mohammed (sal) is the means to understand life, as the Prophet Mohammed (sal) embodies the *hikma* of Allah (Swt). As we live this life seeking that subtle balance, Askandari reminds us that **“Part of the completeness of grace (*tamamu ‘n-ni’ma*) accorded you lies in His providing you with what suffices and holding you back from what makes you exceed bounds”** (#225, pg 55).

All that is exemplary, all that is enjoined upon us in this text: to find balance, to utilize both the divine and the “*shaytanic*” in life as a means of brining us toward and permanently in the Divine presence, can be seen as a narrative on the character, action, teachings, and love of the Prophet (sal). He is the physical manifestation of the wisdom Allah (swt) has given to us, and has provided this creation with; wisdom that gives a person security, a sense of peace, and the taste of knowledge and understanding.

Not only can the *Hikam* help us to understand the Prophet (sal) better, but I also

believe that such efforts as the *Tadbir* and the *Hikam* of Askandari, and the other three texts written by him, are texts created to give us an understanding of the relationship between Tasawwuf and Islam—Tasawwuf, in this sense of purity/*saf* and a process of *ataskiyyat*; and Islam, in the sense of both the physical manifestation of peace, security, and safety and as an everlasting means for all human beings to come to peace and acceptance of the *tadbīr* of Allah (SwT). Thus the relationship of Tasawwuf to Islam is like the relationship of the soul to the body and the dynamic movement of the body to the soul.

Overview

When we go through it, we can see the Aphorisms as series of statements, brief treatises, and *du'a* that lead, one upon the other, to levels of awareness, levels of unique purity and unfathomable depth; guiding us toward clear and pure perception. He has offered a challenge and a testimony to the purity of what Allah (swt) has bestowed upon us. Askandari offers us statements of immutable laws, crystal clear to the one who can see, cryptically inviting to one who seeks to see; words that take one swiftly on the current of the soul, past semantics, to the universal language of truth, beauty, love, and challenge. Time and again Ibn Ata'ala challenges us to reflect, matching this with the consequences of distraction, avoidance, insincerity or torpor. In this way, [he is] giving us multiple doorways into clearer understanding of what some call the science of Allah, the inner sciences, the inner relationships of truth or science that are repeatable phenomena always in our life.

In my talk today, I want to draw out a theme that can be found throughout the *Kitab al-Hikam*: that of perception and veiling. This subject can be further divided into the nature of the veil between ourselves and Allah, the veils that stop us from seeing ourselves, and the veils of the *auliya*. Over the next two days I will discuss these areas and the Wisdom of Ibn Ata'ala on how to clarify our perception of and through these veils.

Ibn Ata'ala says this about veils: **“Veiling (*as-sitr*/curtain, drape, cover) is of two kinds: veiling of disobedience, and veiling in it. Common people seek God’s**

veiling in disobedience out of fear of falling in rank amongst mankind. The elect seek veiling of disobedience out of fear of falling from the sight of the Real King”

(#133, pg 42).

One way to pierce these veils is through refining our perception. In Arabic, in Sufic and Islamic terminology, the word *idraq* means perception. This word has a number of different connotations to it. In addition to perception, it means apprehension, not just apprehending something in terms of knowledge, but being apprehensive of something, which means we have to have humility when we question our perception. The term is used to connote any kind of cognitive experience, like the *idraq* of this room. I perceive this room; I can perceive a specific object using my external sense organs. It can also be used to describe sensing of something through your internal senses. In addition to perceiving with our eyes and ears, we can intuit something, or estimate something through the faculties of inner and outer perception. We can come to certain guesses or estimates on something, or even imagine something, or see something through a dream or imagination, which is a kind of intuitive sense. Sometimes through deductive reasoning and rational perception, we can come to certain conclusions.

Obviously, there are many ways that we perceive things. This perception or cognition through external senses (*basara*) should be clearly distinguished from the internal perceptions or signs of the heart (*basīra*). As Qur'an reminds us in Sura Ya-Siin, sometimes our perceptions (internal and external) are clouded.

Wa ja'alnaa mim bayni aydeehim saddaḥw-wa min khalfihim saddaḥ fa-aghshaynaahum fa-hum laa yub^asiruun

And We have set a barrier before them, and a barrier behind them, and shrouded them so that do not see (36: 09).

As a seeker on the path it's very important how we perceive things, because we are all confused about perception. We hear something, we think we understand it. We see something; we think we understand what we are seeing. We assume something based on our own personal experience and project that onto something else. We imagine something is happening, but it is not; or we use reasoning to come to a conclusion about something that is fallacious. How many times a day does that happen?

Perceiving and Veiling of Allah

In light of this, I want to begin to talk today about the inherent goal of our relationship with ourselves and with Allah as being one and the same. Many of us act like Allah is veiled from us. But Askandari tells us that is not so:

“The Real (*al-Haqq*) is not veiled from you. Rather, it is you who are veiled from seeing It, for, were anything to veil It, then that which veils It would cover It. But if there were a covering to It then that would be a limitation of Its Being: every limitation of anything has power over it. “And He is the Omnipotent, above His servants” (Qur’an 6:18) (#33, pg 29).

Islam is based on *tawhid*, the oneness of Allah; consequently, everything in this universe is related directly to Allah (Swt) and to everything that we perceive. If we discipline ourselves, if we control our emotions and control and direct our mind, we can begin to perceive that it is we who are veiled, not Allah.

To see the unity of Allah, we need to deal very clearly with our distractions. (i.e. the time we spend in ‘otherness’...other than Allah (Swt)). We have to embrace the reality that sometimes this means to pay no attention, and sometimes that means to confront distractions.

This conscious willingness and consequent intention/action to become aware of ones self and being—what I call, “being in the presence of the Presence” of Allah (Swt)— is the opportunity afforded us by Sufism. In his first treatise, which I will not dwell on today; Askandari says, **“The Presence is the nesting-place of the hearts of initiates: They take refuge in it and dwell in it.”** If one perceives the profundity of this treatise, one begins to realize that Tasawwuf or Sufism is at the core of this seeing or perception. It is by the permission of Allah (Swt) that we see. It is by the permission of Allah (Swt) that we have any experience in life; yet permission without our own personal will and intention is like the rain falling on unseeded ground.

This refinement of our perception is accomplished, as Askandari says, in the ‘voyage of the heart.’ **“Meditation (*al-fikra*) is the voyage of the heart in the domains of alterities (*mayadin al-aghyar*)” (#260, pg 59).** But as he previously points out in #259, **“It would be disappointing—really disappointing—if you were to find yourself free of distractions and then not head toward Him, or if you were to have few obstacles**

and then not move on to Him!” (pg 59).

Reliance on Allah

Sometimes we do not see the way to be free of distraction and obstacles, but if we move in conformity with the *shar*, on the road to the truth, we begin to understand that *tā'a*/obedience, is the result of this reliance on Allah (Swt). But it implies that one is in the position to obey, to act to take upon oneself the responsibility to voluntarily obey. This word is filled with choice and intention. If we move against the Shariah, then we are *masiya*, in disobedience to Allah. But when we develop a relationship with circumstances in our life, and the internal relationship with Allah is reliant on the understanding that everything is coming from Allah (Swt), then we are in a state of obedience. There is no resistance that comes from being obedient. When we resist, because of ego, desires, fears, and arrogance, then we are in a state of disobedience to Allah.

In the *Hikam*, Askandari is telling us to strive to make our deeds according to the *Shar'īah*, or *amal ul tariqah* (deeds according to the *tariqah*/path or direction); and the *amal ul haqiq* (deeds according to reality-Truth): the deeds and actions of one with true *iman* and *ihsan*. He reminds us, **“The point at issue is not the existence of searching. The point at issue is only that you be provisioned with virtuous conduct (*husn al-adab*)”** (#128, pg 42).

When our conduct is consistent with the will of Allah, then everything we do is an act of worship. To understand what this actually means ... feels like...that absolutely everything you do is devotion, is not an intellectual process but an experiential one...one that evolves and manifests as a result of ones will, intentions and consequent actions. In other words, we begin to see/perceive clearly what is before us. When the capacity, the inclination, and the sensitivity to Love within our hearts is directed and focused, we experience it in our life. In this sense, obedience or submission is an act of conscious acceptance, i.e. accepting what is already present. With that realization, the veils are lifted and we can see that in that state of servitude, we are always in the Divine presence; we see that what is coming to us and within is in the reality of the Divine presence.

This state is like being aware, so to speak, that we are surrounded by air; either

because we are consciously breathing or we are unable to breathe and become acutely aware of that which we previously took for granted. By consciousness due to attunement or deprivation, we perceive our state. And so we gain awareness of our proximity to Allah (Swt). Allah of course is as near to us as our jugular vein; but we become aware of the proximity of Allah by such *amal*, such deeds and actions that naturally evolve from sincere attention, *tawwajuh*, *tafakkur*, *muhasabat*, *muraqabah*, and *mushahadah*.

To look at this in other ways, as some scholars have, we could also say that *Shar'īah* is the guide to worship Allah, and *Tariqah* is to direct yourself toward Allah, and *Haqiqah* is to witness that whole process. Or [we could say] that *Shar'īah* is the rectification of what is the *dhahir*, the outer/ external. And *Tariqah* is the rectification of the internal questions; the search for understanding. And *Haqiqah* is the rectification of the perceptions of the soul. Different scholars have looked at it in different ways; what is important is that Allah (Swt) throughout Creation/Universes gives us different means to perceive and to direct ourselves. He also gives us checks and balances within the systems for that rectification that keeps us directed: *tawbah*-to repent of our past actions and to abstain from further bad actions, and *istikhārah*- to be able to go forward in a good way and be consistent in making further good actions, are two examples of provisions.

We could say that Allah swt gives us *ikhlas*/sincerity, and truthfulness in our *niyyat*/intention, gives us *taslim*/inner peace, tranquility, and harmony in order that our hearts become calm and pure. Our soul, too, has to find its balance. Our soul comes from Allah (Swt). Our *ruh* is at peace. It comes into this physical world and becomes almost in opposition to what is happening in our physical body, with our *nafs*. It has to find justification for its existence in this very disruptive, confused, chaotic world and physical being. How does it rectify its own state to find peace in this world as well as from the world it remembers? How do we rectify that difference? Allah (Swt) gives us the way for our souls. Our practices are based on this, on *tafakkur* and *muraqabah* to become consciously aware of that Divine presence. Ibn Ata'ala tells us:

“There is a light wherewith He unveils for you His created things (al-athar) and there is a Light wherewith He unveils for you His attributes (awsaf)” (#152, pg 46).

Through *tawbah* and *muhasabat*, this light and His attributes are revealed to us.

Hopefully, we are intentionally making *muhasabat*, but often we are not. Often we make *muhasabat* just because we catch our self doing things that are not right, or saying things that are not good, or we catch our self in laziness and torpor, or in your excuse making, or in anger and frustration, or in your jealousy and anxieties and the harshness of your words.

Most of us are not sitting down like we should be, doing daily (or hourly?!) *muhasabat*. But the opportunities for *muhasabat* are coming to us, because in the Reality that is Allah (Swt), Love, Compassion, Mercy and Forgiveness are cornerstones. Once we are on the path of Tasawwuf, we cannot avoid seeing ourselves reflected in the perfection of the Creator's Attributes/Creation. The humility that follows such reflection is commented on by Ibn Ata'ala, **“Nothing pleads on your behalf like extreme need, nor does anything speed gifts to you quicker than lowliness and want”** (#129, pg 42). But he also tells us, **“Were it not for the kindness of His veiling (*jamil sitrih*) no deed would be worthy of acceptance”** (#131, pg 42).

Veiling of Ourselves

There are many ways (greater and less) that we veil our true state from ourselves. Sometimes we are able to perceive these veils and at other times we are not. There are the veils of this world (clouds of created things) and the veils of the *nafs*.

Veils of this World

We find throughout the *Hikam* aphorisms indicating the distractions of this world as veils to true knowledge. For example, he says: **“The Cosmos (*al-kawn*) is all darkness. It is illuminated only by the manifestations of God (*dhuhur al-Haqq*) in it. He who sees the Cosmos and does not contemplate Him in it or by it or before it or after it, is in need of light and is veiled from the sun of gnosis by the clouds of created things (*al-lathar*.)”** (#14, pg 25). Not only is this veiling the veiling of one's intelligence, as the *tafsir* tells, but it eclipses our “beingness.”

I don't think any of us want to embrace being in darkness, veiled from true knowledge any more than we want to embrace arrogance, or jealousy, or envy, or greed, or anger, or doubt-- all of which poison and corrupt. But we all have a certain arrogance when we think, “Well; everything is going to be okay. I can handle this or that. I can be

around anybody. I can be in any situation.” For this is the domain of ‘other’ than Allah (Swt) and there cannot be ‘other’ than Allah. Yet those who suffer from such arrogance distort their knowledge and act as if surrounding oneself with darkness is protective or is a proof strength. This, of course, obviously is pure *nafs ammāra*.

We say to ourselves, “I’m like everyone else, but I can’t be touched by the things that touch everyone else. I can sit with the drinkers, and not drink. I can sit with the people who are liars and not lie. I can be with corrupted people and not be corrupted. Because I’ve done it. I have nothing to fear.”

Because, we think that to be afraid would mean that we’re weak. So we say to ourselves, “I can hang out wherever I want to hang out, do whatever I want to do, because I am strong.” Ibn Ata’ala tells us:

“The best knowledge is the one accompanied by fear (al-khashya)” (#232, pg 56).

Ibn Ata’ala Askandari and all the *shuykh* up until now, to this very useless *shaykh* who sits before you, are telling you and telling myself, watch out. The world didn’t get to where it is today by all the good people doing only good things, and caring and acting only with good *adab* about all the good things for everybody. And we know where it is today. Do you think you are immune? As Askandari says: **“So long as you are in this world, be not surprised at the existence of sorrows. For, truly, it manifests nothing but what is in keeping with its character or its inevitable nature”** (#24, pg 28).

Each of us has to honestly and humbly see our self and put our self in the right place at the right time for the right reason. It’s arrogant to think we can just be with anyone and not be affected, and not let our perceptions be distorted by preference, bias and prejudices—cultural, national, or racial. **“Do not keep company with anyone whose state does not inspire you and whose speech does not lead you to God”** (#43, pg 31).

We need have to have internal consistency. But corruption and distraction are insidious. It comes very quietly into our life. We have to turn our attention to understand what it really, really means to be in that Divine presence. What does it really mean to accept what Allah (Swt) has provided; and be at peace?

Humility as the Key to Clear Perception

Certain qualities, like humility and sincerity, allow us to perceive what is hidden from us; developing these qualities manifest clear perception of our self, our state, and the veils that keep us from being in the Presence. Many times, Qur'an reminds us the importance of humility:

Qad aflaha-l-mu'minuun. Alladheena hum fee salaatihim khaashi'uun

"Successful indeed are the believers, those who humble themselves in their prayers." (Al-Mu'minūn 23:1-2).

And also, in Suratu-l-Arāf:

Ud'u Rabbakum tadarru'añw-wa khufyatan innahu laa yuhibbu-l-mu'tadeen.

Wa laa tufsiduu fi-l-'ardi ba'da islaahihaa wa-d'uuhu khawfañw-wa tama'an inna rahmata-Llaahi qareebum-mina-l-muhsineen

"Call on your Lord with humility and in private, for Allah loves not those who transgress beyond bounds. Do not mischief on the earth, after it has been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing in your hearts, for the Mercy of Allah is always near to those who do good." (Al-Arāf 7:55-56)

Humility can manifest from the inner; it can come from our sensitivity to the subtle perceptions of the Divine Reality, or it can come from outer circumstances that humble us. The humility that comes as a result of the choice to remember Allah is a more lasting and profound humility. It is a humility that effectively changes our character and maintains our character at a high level, creating within us a great reliance on Allah (Swt). To "call on Allah with humility" is to see our relationship with Allah (Swt) as a means of support to us, not just a relationship with some thing one prays to or worships. This is real reliance on Allah and through that we get support and clarify of perception and direction.

It is very important for us to continue to practice that which results in humility, until we gain the discipline and have trained our soul through such *adab*. Yet humility is not practicable unless it is sincerely intended and it cannot be intended without a framework for that intention, a deep yearning for, and reliance on, Allah (swt) and that

involves accepting the uniqueness of our *qadr* and understanding that we are apart of, not apart from, the system of Creator/Creation. Indeed, not only are we a part of the system, we are the focal point, the nexus, of that Divine Will—the center and the point of connection between the inner and the outer. What we can do is to pursue and embrace the virtue of *adab*, the practice of refined character, and as a social being [pursue] our respectful relationship between our self and ‘other’. We can ask our self, as Qur’an asks us,

Has not the time arrived for the believers that their hearts in all humility/*khasha'a* should engage in the remembrance of Allah and of the Truth which has been revealed to them... (Al-Hadid 57:16)

Awareness of Allah through Adab

We can show respect to Allah (Swt) by elevating *adab* in every situation. To respect Allah (Swt) is to be grateful for the life we have and the creation with all its inter-related and interdependent systems/laws/values . Remembrance and respect for Allah (Swt), for Allah’s creation, is the greatest acknowledgment of the Divine presence. Each element of our life performed with sincerity and *adab* creates the environment for respect and awareness. Whether it is to remove a stone in the path of someone; or take care and have positive tone of our voice; how we sit, even the position of our body; how we pray, with a sense of nobility and gratitude; and how we serve others, indeed all creatures—all create the atmosphere for personal, spiritual, success. Sidna Umar (ra), it is related, said: *“If a donkey in Iraq were to trip because of the twigs lying on the road, I will be asked by Allah on the Day of Judgment about it.”*

“Your nearness (*qurb*) to Him is that you contemplate His nearness. Otherwise, what comparison is there between you and the existence of His nearness?” (#214, pg 54).

When there is awareness, consciousness, and contemplation, success is inevitable; it comes upon us as we remember Allah (Swt). The results are automatic and comprehensive. As we see from the above aphorisms. Again, the over-all message is one of inevitable progress to the degree of consciousness and remembrance. Yet we are reminded that our emotions, our human nature to question and measure progress needs to

be taken into account. **“Do not lose hope in the acceptance of an act of yours wherein you found no awareness of the Divine Presence. Sometimes He accepts an act the fruit of which you have not perceived right away”** (#219, pg 54).

Each act of acceptance is not necessarily accompanied by awareness of the Presence. But understanding the ultimate purpose is a form of awareness of the Presence that enables us to see beyond the moment or through the moment. Let us not be distracted or doubting. As the great Shaykh Ibn Ata’ala tells us, **“Do not attest to the validity of an inspiration (*warid*) whose fruits you know now. The purpose of the rainclouds is not to give rain; their only purpose is to bring forth fruit”** (#220, pg 55).

How do we achieve that state of awareness? And if that is lacking in the moment, how can we be confident in the Presence (*ihsan*)? For that we must go back to very basic teachings. Begin by doing what is prescribed, even if it is only the form at first, for it is the framework for deeper meanings. Have your limbs do what your limbs should do, your heart do what your heart should do, your lips speak the words your lips should speak, and so on.

Real knowledge, *marifah*, is the fruit of these activities, the fruit of *atazkiyya*, of purification. It is the fruit of the process of cleansing ourselves. It is the fruit of being filled with the *anwar*, the illumination, the *tajalli* of knowledge. Those of us who say that we associate ourselves with *Tasawwuf*, have to realize that this level of *Tariqah* cannot be reached until we realize the efficacy of obedience. The efficacy of obedience lies in trying very hard to understand the origin of the Shar’iah in the Truth of Universal Harmony.

So I will end today by reminding you that, even as we seek to refine our sight, Allah’s vision is always greater than our small view. The *murid* who intends to achieve such peace and tranquility; to reach a high level of spiritual awareness of Divine presence, who intends to move through all the stations, cannot rely on themselves. They have to rely on Allah (Swt)’s *nai’ma*, *fadl*, and achieve the level of *tawfiq*, Divine acceptance and *hidayat* (*guidance*). To realize we are receiving the *hidayat* of Allah is to understand that Allah is rectifying everything that is wrong and making everything right. Allah (swt) says in Qur’an,

Wa rabbuka yakhluku maa yashaaa’u wa yakhtaaru maa kaana lahumu-l-

khiyaratu sub^hhaana-Llaahi wa ta^caalaa ^cammaa yushrikuun

“And your Lord creates what he wills and chooses. The choice is not up to them. Exalted is Allah and high above anything they associate with Him.”

[Qur’an 28:68]

If Allah had intended, He could have made the enemies of anbiyya followers. They would not have turned against the wisdom of Allah (Swt). They would have understood that the trials and tribulations Allah gave to the *anbiyā* were purposeful and intended. But that is not what he did.

For those who have knowledge, who live in awareness of Allah, trials are a part of the path. But, as Ibn Ata’ala reminds us, **“Sometimes darkneses come over you in order that He make you aware of the value of His blessings upon you.”** (#198, pg 51).

Allah (swt) tells us in Qur’an,

Wa law shaaa’a Rabbuka laja^cala-n-naasa ummatañw-wa ah^{id}atañw-wa laa yazaaluuna mukhtalifeen

Illaa mar-rah^{im}a Rabbuka wa lidhaalika khalaqahum...

If your Rabb had intended, he would have made you one people, having a single religious identity. But they continue in disagreement except for the person whom your Rabb has shown mercy; and for that he has created them.” (Suratu-l-Hūd - 11:118 -119)

There are things known, mysteries know to Allah (Swt), reasons why Allah Swt did not guide everyone to Islam in the same way. There are diverse religious paths and philosophies. But it doesn’t mean that all the Muslims agree, or are at the same rank, or in the same association with Allah (Swt) and His mercy.

Only when you find the mercy of Allah do you find the closeness to Allah (Swt). Therefore, you have to understand, in very subtle terms, that every day Allah puts you in a position to come near to Him, to practice the things you need practice. It’s the deeds that put you in position to be able to submit to Allah.

Tomorrow I will return to the subject of perception, and discuss how we can

overcome some of the veils of our *nafs*, and also, I hope, talk about perception of others, in particular the *shuyukh* and *awliyā*..

CLOSING DU'A