

“What You See is What You Get” Part II

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

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OPENING DU’A

Today I want to return to the subject of perception and the veils that can be found throughout the *Hikam* of Ibn Ata’ala.

Veils of the Nafs

There are many types of veils that keep us from seeing and understanding ourselves and others. Imam Ibn Ata’ala Askandari says, **“One of the signs of delusion is sadness over the loss of obedience coupled with the absence of resolve to bring it back to life.”** (#76, pg 35).

And he also says, **“A sign of the heart’s death is the absence of sadness over the acts of obedience that you have neglected and the abandonment of regret over the mistakes you have made”** (#48, pg 32).

The implication in this aphorism is that our heart will remain alive as long as we continue to experience sadness and regret over our acts of disobedience and mistake. Allah loves those who have *hikma*/wisdom, and wants us to use the wisdom to take advantage of our mistakes and forgetfulness. If we only use our good deeds to come close to Allah, then we are only benefiting from half the spiritual experience. We don’t want to be relying on our own deeds; we need to be relying on Allah.

So in the moment of that *taif* (or touch) of Shaytan, in the moment when you do something that is wrong, or are about to do something wrong, or went too far, the believer does not become depressed, or lose hope, because the sin is not greater than the *nai’ma* of Allah. Allah’s grace is greater. Instead, to the believer, each moment of

forgetfulness is that Divine wake up call. We can allow our sin to put us back on track; allow the wrong action, wrong thinking, distraction, fear, doubt, or impatience to put us back on track and return to the *siratal mustaqim*,

Ibn Ata'ala tells us that **“The source of every disobedience, indifference, and passion is self-satisfaction. The source of every obedience, vigilance, and virtue is dissatisfaction with one’s own self”** (#35, pg 29). Every disobedience comes from the selfish needs and desires of your *nafs ammāra*. If you are satisfied with your excuses, in order to do what you want to do, that’s a source of your disobedience. This statement is so powerful, so important, so valuable, and so huge in its meaning, it should be written in gold.

Once the *himma* or the desire to rise up to Allah diminishes, and the person becomes satisfied with themselves and where they are in their decisions, that’s where the sin starts, where disobedience lurks...in complacency. So the believer who has understanding should ask themselves, “Is my *himma* diminishing? And am I starting to become complacent?” If your cup is so full, then Allah will not pour anything else into it. Don’t be satisfied with yourself, and always seek increase from Allah. Otherwise, complacency will creep in and overcome you with sins and bad deeds.

Ibn Ata'ala goes on to tell us about another veil that we can put between ourselves and Allah. He writes, **“Let no sin (*dhanb*) reach such proportions in your eyes that it cuts you off from having a good opinion of God, for, indeed, whoever knows his Lord considers his sin as paltry next to His generosity.”** (#49, pg 32).

When we hear this, we have to try to understand where our *nafs* is, how it is responding. Ibn Ata'ala is telling us about how our *nafs* works.

We may be hearing this aphorism with our ears, but what it instructs won’t become our state, until our *nafs* is brought to that point where it can become settled. If we are still anchored in our *nafs lawwama*, then it won’t be settled. You will hear it, it will sound great, and we will forget about what Nobody became a brain surgeon by reading a book. But we think we can find peace and happiness by reading a book—only if the book is Qur’an is it possible. Why? Aside from the obvious, it is because we are

enjoined to turn our attention to Allah and others before our selves.

One of things we should get from the study of this series of aphorisms is the understanding that arrogance is really one of the characteristics that will most quickly stop the progress of a human being. Sometimes a person will get to the point where they start to see how deluded they are, and they look around and see how few people really care, (what most people want is some ritual and some procedure to follow, some church, mosque or synagogue to attend; some forms to deal with), and they think how easy it is to opt for a life of not caring. What's amazing is how many seemingly intelligent people do that, and thereby foreclose their understanding of subtleties, and not just for the sake of understanding, but for the sake of eternity.

So Ibn Ata'ala Askandari said, **“Be fearful lest the existence of His generosity towards you and the permanence of your bad behavior toward Him not lead you step by step to ruin. ‘We shall lead them to ruin step by step from whence they know not’”** (7:182) (#65, pg 34).

These two aphorisms, when looked at together, show that a *mu'min* must have a very healthy balance of *khawf*/fear and *ridā*/hope in Allah. If one is greater than the other, then you become complacent and fall into a low state. **“Sometimes,”** Ibn Ata'ala says, **“He opens the door of obedience for you, but not the door of acceptance. Sometimes, He condemns you to sin, and it turns out to be a cause for arrival to Him”** (#95, pg 37).

Gratitude and Contentment through humility and humiliation

“A disobedience that bequeaths humiliation and need is better than an obedience that bequeaths pride and ostentation. Nothing pleads on your behalf like extreme need, and nothing speeds gifts to you quicker than humility and want.” (#96, pg 37)

The caveat that we must understand with this is that if we don't have the foundation, and we don't have the inclination, and we don't have the discrimination to see beyond the disobedience, it will not lead us to humility. It will not lead us to

uncovering the truth. It will not lead us to contentment. It will not lead us to *nafs mardiya*, or returning to our Lord content and gratified. We must hone our perception to seeing that Allah is the only One Who is the Provider, who gives us His *rizq*, so that the name “*Al Qayyum*/the All Sufficient” becomes a reality to us. Only then can Allah bring us to that stage of humility through disobedience, only if the foundation is strong, and our intention is right.

This aphorism does not refer to intentional disobedience, but unintentional disobedience. Distraction, even desires, even with good intention, may bring you to humility through humiliation, and to contentment through shame, to obedience through disobedience. A major task of the true seeker is to find a way to this *maqam* of *nafs al mardiya*. In this *maqam*, not only is the self content with Allah, but it is also gratified by Allah—grateful, and fulfilled. Gratitude is a cornerstone of the *Shadhili* teaching. Such gratitude creates fulfillment and that’s why this station it is called the “fulfilled self.” As Allah says in Suratu-l-Bayyinah,

Radiya-llahu anhum wa radu’anh; khalika liman khashiya rabbahum

“Allah is content with them, and they are content with Him. That is for one who is in awe of his Lord.” (98:08)

The Prophet (sal) was asked, “***When shall we attain Allah’s contentment with us?***” ***And he replied, “When you are content with your Lord.”*** At the stage when you are content with your Lord, the light of your heart is on. The warming light of your heart is on, and shines through your translucent skin. And the heart advances from the wholesomeness of *a heart filled to overflowing with righteousness* to the heart that is in total awe of Allah, constantly, always inclined toward Him, *munīb*/imbued with *hayī*/modesty toward Him in every condition.

What we are told in the Qur’an is that there is a direct correlation between a state of awe and a ‘sound heart’ and a state of Peace. And beyond that we are told that what follows is fulfillment. Allah says,

Man khashiya r-rahmana bi-l-ghaybi wa jaa’a bi qalbi-muniba (inii).

Udkhuluha bi-salam; dhalika youmu-l-khuluda.

“Whoever is secretly in awe of the merciful and comes to Him with a sound heart, enter it in peace. This is the day of immortality. In it they shall have whatever they wish, and with Us is more.” (50:33-34)

The witnessing in the heart is the witnessing of the manifestation of the force and power of Allah that results in *khashiya*/awe. In this sense we are in the systemic recursive Reality, which is reasonable when we understand the Divine Presence, the constant system. Awe creates fulfillment, a state of knowledge and perception of the *Jalal* and *Jamal* of Allah (Swt), which creates that secure state of awe and submission. It is a self-perpetuating closed system. We see that all the actions attributed to Allah are essentially the manifestations of His names. When you achieve this *maqam*, Allah also gifts you with the unveiling of the miracles of His creation, so that you can point out these miracles to others, and so they can feel and see the love of Allah (Swt)—miracles for those who heretofore denied or rejected the truth, yet feel called to Allah. That’s really important. Because among us there may be those who heard the truth and rejected the truth, and only when someone who is really content with Allah speaks to them and shows them, is there any hope of them coming back to the truth, because the light is on.

VEILS OF THE AULIYĀ

Going back to the subject of perception and our perception of ourselves and others and the veils created by our *nafs* in various states, we recognize that our perception is often clouded...The exception to this is in the *auliyā/shuyukh* whose perception is clear and can pierce our veils with their *basīra*. Our deception, due to the veils we place before our own self is that everyone, including the *auliyā*, is exactly alike. It is hard to really see the uniqueness of the *murshid’s* sight or at least to sustain that insight.

Even when a *murshīd* is trying to decide whether a person will be a good and

sincere student or a potential student, one of the things he has to see beyond is what is the obvious. This is also exactly what the *murīd* has to be able to see or at least have the humility to sense. The *murīd* not only has to learn how to perceive beyond the obvious or the apparent, but must have the sense of that possibility with the specific *murshid*. This subjective quality requires the courage to access deeper levels of submission and trust. It is intuitive and closely aligned to our ability to embrace not only the necessity of seeking, but *munashabat*. Seeing in the guide only what references and points to Allah (SwT) and those Divine attributes allows a glimpse behind the veils even of the *auliyā*.

Shaykh Abul Hasan as Shadhili said, “*Every saint has a veil, and my veil is earthly causes.*” So one of the things a student has to learn, and probably the most difficult thing to learn if they are to benefit from their *murshīd*, is to perceive beyond the obvious. This is a result of sensitivity to the lights of the sages. **“The lights of sages (*anwaru ‘l-hukama*) precede their words, so that, wherever illumination (*at-tanwir*) occurs, the expression (*at-ta’bir*) arrives there”** (182 page 50), which points to the verity that only the heart perceives the possibility of such relatedness: **“The hearts and the innermost centers of being are the places where lights arise.”** (Askandari)

Moreover, the relatedness of the light of the heart of the knowers of Reality, the true friends of Allah (SwT), have the keys to the treasure room: **“There is a light deposited in hearts which is nourished by the Light coming from the treasuries of the invisible realms.”**(Askandari)

In some cases, like in the case of my Shaykh, Hazrat Azad Rasool, he was incredibly consistent in what he did outwardly and what he did inwardly. But that was from my perception of him. I never was, for example, one of his students in Jamia Milia University, nor was I a member of his family, nor did I live with him day and night for years on end. So in my perception, he was very consistent. There are some whose veil is that of appearing domineering and forceful, and others who appear passive. What seems to be true is that the veil is exactly what each *murīd* needs to see through in order to achieve a lifting of their misperceptions, distractions, assumptions and preferences. You see what you get and you get what you see until you see with the eyes of Wisdom and

Truth, humility and gratitude, trust and submission. As Ibn Ata'ala says, **“Real humility is the one which arises from the contemplation of His Sublimity and the illuminations of His Attribute (#240). Only contemplation of His Attribute can dislodge you from your attribute” (#241 pg 57).**

The reason for a *waliyullah* or *shaykh* appearing in one guise is that at times it helps to dislodge us from ourselves and open our eyes. The truth's manifestation through a person of this quality has a certain flavor to it, a certain force to it, a certain necessity for a *murīd*. The surroundings, and the composition of the surroundings, may be exactly what is needed to allow a very specific teaching to come through, just like the plants that grow in the shade in the forest are different than the ones that grow in the sun in the field. Some get their strength and beauty when many trees are around them and they are shaded, while others need the heat of the summer sun.

What predominates in us as seekers inwardly manifests outwardly in us. Ibn Ata'ala tells us, **“Whatever is deposited in the invisible world of innermost hearts (*ghayb as-sara'ir*) is manifest in the visible world of phenomena (*shahadat az-zawahir*)” (#28, pg 28).**

That's how our *murshīd* can read us and know what is good for us, how to guide us, how to adjust the teachings. Even amidst a group of people who are not exactly the same, or from exactly the same background there is still something that draws them to the multiple facets of the personality of that Order, and that particular *murshīd*, and that time and place where they find themselves. It's not just black and white: the *shaykh* is one way and everybody is the same way. The *shaykh* has a strong temperament; therefore, everyone has a strong temperament. It's not that simple. What we have to understand is that there are things that are common that draw us. We can come from different cultures, different time frames, different ages, but there is something in our inner self that draws us. Just as the *murīd* manifest outwardly his or her inner state, so too, the quality that predominates even in the *waliyullah* or the *shaykh*'s inner experiences or inner awareness will most often predominate in their outer state.

Mirror of the Murshīd

When a sincere *murīd*, who really wants to understand his/her self, looks at their *murshīd*, they are able to see a reflection of their own self. If the relationship is correct, balanced correctly, the *murīd* can see him/her self in the mirror of the *murshīd*. Sometimes, it is as a response or reaction; sometimes it is in silence; sometimes in absence, and sometimes in presence; but always referring back to the *murshīd*. Eventually, in effort (not necessarily in time), one attains the state of seeing how the *murshīd* reflects the Prophet Mohammed (sal); and therefore, they are seeing themselves in the mirror of the Prophet Mohammed (sal). They are seeing that the Prophet (sal) had many aspects to his character and personality, because those aspects were reflective of his reflection of Allah (Swt). In the company of the Prophet (sal) you see groups of people of different characters and personalities, even more disparate, yet reflective of those different qualities.

There is no way that a person of sincerity can escape their self in the company of a true *shaykh*. There is no way a true seeker can escape their self. A person thinks they are escaping what's uncomfortable, or getting away from what's not right, or what's not real, or they think, "I don't like that personality," or "Why is the person like that?" or "Why did the *shaykh* do that?" or "Who are these people? They are not like me at all. They're weak and I'm strong," or "They're stupid and I'm intelligent," or "They are blind followers and I have a mind of my own," and all that.

A true, sincere seeker can't escape all those things that are reflecting an element of their character and personality. Those are all elements of your spiritual character and personality that have to be dealt with and overcome on this journey. **"Wheresoever you turn,"** you see the mirror of yourself. That's called the **"face of Allah."** The face of Allah is the face of the truth, the *Haqq*. The face of Allah (Swt) is what is real, the mirror we get a glimpse of reality in. It is in this light that we get a glimpse of reality; it's the mirror that we see that reality in, as it reflects ourselves or not. As Ibn Ata'ala says, **"Lights (*al-anwar*) are the riding-mounts (*mataya*) of hearts and of their innermost**

centers (*al-asrar*)” (#55, pg 33).

Historical Context of the Auliya

We know that throughout time, there have been people, kings and rulers, who have been brought to their knees by such people of spiritual capability, and have become their obedient servants and submissive to them. So as we begin our journey, sometimes we get a taste of that. We get a taste of our own fears, our own humility. We get a glimpse of the power of knowledge, of the meaning of someone who has *ijāzat*. We look around and see what has been accomplished by such a person. It may not compare to this organization or that organization, or a huge corporation; but in the eye of a seeker, in the heart of someone who has the seed of humility and sincerity in them, it gets awakened.

Askandari makes the distinction in this way, **“The lights of some people precede their invocations (*adhkar*), while the invocation of some people precede their lights. There is the invoker (*dhakir*) who invokes so that his heart be illumined; and there is the invoker whose heart has been illumined and he invokes”** (#253, pg 59).

Often, we are veiled from perceiving this distinction or the subtleties of the *auliyā*. Shaykh Ibn Ata’ala said in another text, **“I once heard the Shaykh (Kushari) (ra) say of Abul Hasan as Shadhili (ra), both the public in general and those in authority were ignorant of his true rank due to the frequency of his (Abul Hasan as Shadhili) visits to them on the behalf of others.”** Because of familiarity with him, they missed who he was.

What we all should understand is that kind of help, intercession, for the sake of others in this world--work not dissimilar to what we try to do on a global level-- would only be possible if someone had taken the reflections of the attributes of Allah (SwT) and having developed those qualities, spent their time on others’ behalf, humbled in the pursuit of Allah (SwT). Because only those people truly know the vastness of the presence of Allah.

Some people feel it. When you feel that difference, you want to reflect that in

your own life. You want to be more merciful, kinder, more compassionate, and more patient. And when you can't be, you've been given a sign by Allah (SwT) of what you need to strive for. Prophet Mohammed (sal) said, ***“The merciful will receive mercy from the Most Merciful and Compassionate; therefore, be merciful to those on earth so that He who is in heaven may have mercy on you.”***

For some of the *waliyullah*, their veil might be wealth. There is a story of a man who lived in the Maghrib. *This man was among those who renounced worldly existence and who were devoted to spiritual practices all the time, as much as he could be. He was a fisherman, and gave away some of his catch as sadaqa. He lived on the rest of what he caught. One of this shaykh's followers had decided to travel to the Maghrib, and the shaykh said to him, “If you go to such and such a town, visit my brother, and deliver my greetings to him and a message to him, since he is one of the waliyullah. Please ask him to make supplications for me.” The shaykh's disciple set off on his journey and when he reached the town in question, asked about this man. He was directed to a house which was fit for a king. Confused, he asked for the man, and was told that he was with the Sultan, and that he would have to wait. They ushered him into this very posh room. He was very confused. He waited for an hour, then two hours, and there came the man in beautiful clothing and a beautiful carriage, like a king himself with a whole entourage. This man was more confused than ever. He said, “I nearly left without meeting him, but I said to myself that I can't go because my shaykh, who lives like a pauper, simply, who is a model of frugality and simplicity, told me to come here.”*

So he asked for permission to see this man, and when he saw him he was appalled to see all these slaves and servants around him, dressed in their finery. He said to him, ‘Your brother Shaykh so-and-so sends his greetings.’ The shaykh said, “Have you come from him?”

“Yes.” He said.

“When you return, tell him, ‘How long will you go on being preoccupied with this earthly existence? How long will you go on pursuing this world? When will you

stop craving it? ” And the man thought to himself, “This is really astonishing. Look at this man. What kind of audacity does he have to say that? Look how he lives in this world.

So he went back to the shaykh, who asked me, ‘Did you meet with my brother?’ ‘Yes, I did.’ Said the man.

“What did he say?” Well, the man didn’t want to tell him. But the shaykh said, ‘No, you have to tell me. What did he say? I know he sent me a message.’ So he recounted to him what his brother had said. When he heard it, he wept for a long time. He said, “My brother spoke the truth. God purified his heart of the world and placed it in his hand, and gave him the appearance of worldliness. For me, he took it out of my hands, but I still long for it.”

The Lesson of Perception

It’s very important for us to understand what we long for, and how much we are going to spend our time defending what appears to others to be who we are. There are people who would use this kind of a story as an excuse, but we can’t be concerned with those people. There are many, many different guises. There are people who accept things from others, but are disdained for that. “Oh, I don’t want to be around this person. He accepts worldly offerings from people.” Or there are people who refuse worldly things. “Appearances are deceiving,” we say.

The lesson of perception, therefore, takes another level. Shaykh Abul Hasan as Shadhili said, *“Whoever seeks praise from people by refusing to receive from them simply worships himself and his own desires and has no share in Allah.”* What does “share in Allah” mean? How is that possible? It is only possible when you understand that Allah is a dynamic system. It’s only possible to say that I have no identity in that system, no place to identify myself in that reality.

Someone asked me a question the other, reminiscent of a story in both the Shadhili and Naqshbandi tradition. He asked, “Oh, you are a *shaykh* and a spiritual person. (Someone really said this to me.) You really dress well, and you look like just

anybody. You are a *dervish*, but look how well you dress. You don't appear to be a *dervish*." I said, drawing from the tradition, just as it was said centuries ago by our predecessors: "Allah placed us here in this world. And if we can't blend with the world, and you can't learn to see beyond my dress, then what is the point. You don't know what a *dervish* is."

There are things that make people close their eyes and not see what's in front of them. If you dress the same way they do and you don't look different or play the role, they don't see. They then treat you the same way they treat anybody else, and they become unable to receive a teaching from you. But if they can learn to see beyond *that* perception, well, then there's a possibility they can learn.

There is a poem that speaks to this that comes through the Khwaja Khwajagan:

*"He who knows and knows not that he knows is asleep, wake him
He who knows not, and knows he knows not, is a child; teach him;
He who knows, and knows that he knows, is a wise man, follow him.*

CONCLUSION

I hope I have provided for you some practical examples of the teaching from the point of view of perception. The text is replete with examples, as it is with the topic of *adab*, and others. What I hope I leave you with is that it's not just how you look or where you are, but also what is critical is the character that creates an attitude of attentiveness, how we address our self and others, how conscious that veil is, and whether or not we are content with the idea. Knowledge of the veil, versus the active lifting of the veil, depends on the factors we have discussed. The least of these is our commitment to our self.

But the friends of Allah, the friends of Prophet Mohammed (sal) are people who are just like any of us, but not like any of us at all, if you understand what I mean. We have to be able to look through that veil and be able to see who it is that Allah (Swt) placed before us and where and why: how [did] we come to this moment and this place? Are we satisfied with words and gathering? When we leave here today, what will be taken back with us in our hearts and will we commit to consistently keep the light in our

hearts. As Ibn Ata'ala says, **“Insight (*al-kashf*) belongs to the Light (*an-nur*), discernment (*al-hum*) to the intellect (*al-basira*), and both progression (*al-iqbal*) and retrogression (*al-idbar*) belong to the heart (*al-qalb*)”** (#57, pg 33)

If this whole purpose of bringing us into this kind of a system of the *tariqah* and spiritual pursuit for the majority of our life, if Allah (SwT) desires to enable us to recognize one of His friends, let alone a number of His friends, then Allah will prevent you from just looking at the simple humanness of that individual, and will cause us to see instead that which makes that person near and dear to Allah (SwT). He will cause you to look beyond the human aspects only, to look through or beyond those, into why that person is a beloved of Allah (SwT). Among the community of Sufis, if we don't look to see beyond that, then we may find ourselves falling from the favor of Allah (SwT) for being very superficial.

Seven-hundred years this message has survived and remained relevant. Each generation of seeker and believer must traverse the same pathways and seek the same awareness and use the same lights inner and outer. We are blessed to be among those who at least have been give access to such guidance. For that, with that, we can be grateful. It's a beginning and the rewards are beyond measure.

That's all; a simple message, but perhaps a little practical, *insh'allah*.

CLOSING DUA