



THE APHORISMS OF IBN ATA'ILLAH ISKANDARI:
ACTION ITEMS FOR TODAY'S TO DO LIST

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Bismillaahi-r-Rahmaani-r-Raheem

***Allahumma inna nasalaka mujibati rahmatika
Wa'aza'ima magfiratika,
wa salamata min kulli Itmin,
wal-ganimata min kulli birrin,
wal-fawza bil-jannati min-a nnar.***

Oh Allah, we ask You for words which will make certain Your Mercy, actions which will make certain Your Forgiveness, freedom from every offence, a supply of every virtue, entering Jannah and safety from the Nār.

INTRODUCTION

It is an honor and privilege to sit before you to share some thoughts and insights on one of the most relevant texts, not only for one who pursues the way of *tassawwuf*, but for all Muslims who seek to understand the practical and secure way to live in modern society, among people who are both Muslim and non Muslim, especially at this time of great strain and challenges. The knowledge of the Hikam is one thing, but understanding the *process* of the Hikam and the way of thinking illustrated by Shaykh ibn 'Ata'illah Iskandari can and will change our perspective, our intentions, and our actions. It is here, in a process of trust and submission, in the context of our deepest Islamic core, that we

can find the means for meeting the challenges of modern life, as human beings, as Muslims, *insh'Allah*, as *mu'min*.

The 93rd Aphorism

As we dive deep into the Hikam of Ibn Ata'illah Iskandari, we find an incredible treasure of knowledge. In some cases, we find that knowledge stated exactly in the opposite form that we thought we would find it stated. It is important in the world we are living in, that we allow for the possibility of new perspectives. [It is] a world in which we must change our perspective from one of probabilities, to one of possibilities, from distraction to attraction, from close mindedness to open inquiry, from distrust to trust, and from submission to people to submission to Allah Swt. This kind of thinking is especially important if we are to realize that ***“seeking knowledge from the cradle to the grave”*** (as the Prophet Mohammad (sal) enjoined) is a faith based inquiry that requires the courage to utilize critical thinking and critical inquiry skills, to ask hard questions of ourselves, to question our assumptions, and to seek fulfilling answers from the core of our hearts and the foundations of our belief. Only if we do this will we truly be able to rectify the many misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Islam and Sufism, and reframe our *dīn* to the original template of personal revelation and to Allah's dynamic presence in this Reality/Creation. Not only that, but we will be also able to fulfill our obligation and trust, to serve Allah Swt by serving Allah's creation and creatures, and to fulfill our role as *khalifa* on this earth, as Allah reminds us in Suratu-l-Ahzab:

“Truly we offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and feared it, and the human being [undertook it]. But he has been the oppressor [of himself and others] and ignorant.” (33:72)

Innaa 'aradnaa-l-'amaanata 'alaa-s-samaawaati wa-l-'ardi wa-l-jibaali fa-abayna aay-yahmilnahaa wa ashfaq^ana minhaa wa hamalahaa-l-'iinsaanu innahu kaana dhaluumañ jahuulaa.

Only when we do that can we be able to listen with ears that hear, and see with eyes that can see, a teaching, a path, a Truth that is near to us, around us and within us—Allah Swt. The proof of a lasting teaching lies in its applicability in every age, and in the means it unlocks in the hearts and minds of the seekers of Truth. My dear friends, this Islam is certainly that everlasting teaching that constructs from the most basic elements a humble, yet courageous; peaceful, yet personally demanding; articulate, yet faithful human being. A practical, practicable teaching assiduously undertaken with sincerity can be a major factor in bringing relative Peace and Harmony to this world. And it can be a means of addressing the critical issues we face today, but that is secondary. More importantly, it gives us a clear and straight means to be aware of our purpose and to be consciously in the presence of the Divine Truth, Compassion and Mercy—Allah Swt. By intentionally applying the teachings of Allah Swt, as articulated in the Quran, lived in the Sīrah of the Prophet Muhammad (sal), and heard in the Hadith; [by] opening the door to reaching higher and higher *maqamat/stations*; [by] making obvious the link between the *dhāhir* and the *bātin*, we fulfill our ultimate destiny and covenant with our Creator.

Today I will talk about several aphorisms that can help us understand how to deepen our perceptions, and live our Islam more free of assumptions and bias, more humbly, and *insh'Allah*, more fully. Of course I ask Allah's forgiveness for my own errors and limitations and hope that we can continue on this process of mining the wealth of this great Shaykh's insights.

In the 93rd aphorism, Ibn Ata'illah Iskandari, says:

When He gives, He shows you His kindness (bīr). And when He deprives, He shows you His power (qahhar). In all that, He is making Himself known to you, and coming to you with His gentleness.

For most of us, it is very difficult to see the mercy and kindness of Allah Swt when we are denied what we think we need, deserve, or expect. When we find our basic wants out of reach, we feel threatened, whether it be in the day-to-day material wants and needs, in the realm of our health and well being, or in the form of power and recognition. But in this aphorism, he is directing us to understand that the denial of Allah is an affirmation, an *'āyat*, of the power of Allah Swt. He is reminding us that we don't have the final control, that every action is under the control of Al Qahharu, The Subduer. Yet he also points out that Allah Swt is kind and protecting, Al Wali, and is showing us the attribute of kindness when we are apparently deprived. So, in both the kindness (*bīr*) and power (*qahhar*) Allah is affirming that Allah is actively present, righteous and the bestower of piety in those challenges.

How is it that these two seemingly opposite manifestations have the same result? It is because we are in a dynamic process, part of a dynamic Reality that can compose power and kindness in the form of denial. By subduing power, what emerges is righteousness. This may be contrary to the way we normally think, but it is representative of the unity that is Allah and it testifies to the fact that apparent opposites affirm the totality. Where there is an 'up' defined there must be a 'down,' or where there is 'hardship' there must also be 'ease.' Not only is Allah Swt making us aware of the Divine Presence, and the reality of our place in the ocean of that Presence, but we are being shown the means to perceive the reality of our state within unity/*tawhid* that alone is Allah.

While we don't think about being denied something, as gentleness or kindness, the overriding power of Allah Swt, is telling us, "What you thought is reality is not necessarily reality. What you thought was truth, or justice is not necessarily truth or justice. What your expectation is, is not necessarily what is going to transpire." Only

when you relinquish your attachment to your own perspective, or at least accept that it is flawed, will you be able to see The Real. So abandon your expectations. (This of course reflects back to other teachings of Iskandari on *tadbīr* and the abandoning of self-direction.) This was the instruction of the Prophet (sal), as reported by Umar ibn Al-Khattab, who said:

"If only you relied on Allah a true reliance, He would provide sustenance for you just as He does the birds: They fly out in the morning empty and return in the afternoon with full stomachs."

Life of a Seeker

The fact that our desires and apparent needs are denied, that even our apparent actions and decision-making are sometimes denied by the Absolute Truth (as opposed to the distorted truth that *we* might see) is part of the story of life. Not only that, but it is a necessary part of the narrative of the life of a Sufi, of a seeker, of one who is on the *sair ul suluk*.

But, let us not be distracted or misguided by the metaphor of journeying on the path; because the path, inner and outer, is not just about getting from one place to another. It is an oversimplified, linear way of trying to describe an internal, value-based, non linear process of unveiling of what is already present, fulfilling what is already destined.

So, as we accept this overriding reality with trust, humility, and even contrition in our hearts and minds; as we accept Allah—as we accept Al Qahharu, as we accept Al Haqq the Truth, as we accept Al Latīf, the gentle subtle and the *birr* of Allah Swt; as we become less and less dominated by our self constructed premises and cultural, intellectual biases, we will find that we are in a very progressive state of our spiritual journey. Humble acceptance and openness for knowledge is a sign of making progress. Needless to say, we may accept it one day, in one situation, and not see it in another. We may accept it overall, but in some situations not yet accept it. We may recognize the Divine

presence and kindness in most situations, but not in all. It's all relative in this sojourn of life.

At times, we may even find that we cannot accept it intellectually, but can still find repose and refuge in the idea or possibility of such complete transparency and harmony as a sign of progress. Just accepting that everything comes from Allah Swt can be an agent of revelation and change for us. This is especially true in times like these, as it is precisely contrition and humility that should be the focus of our society today.

Every Muslim should understand the power of *tawbah* and *istigfar* and be a force for social reflection. Through humility, we can recognize the inconsistencies, the limitations of our assumptions, and the reasoning we used to make them, hence the limitations of our understanding. We can recognize that the selfishness and reactivity in our actions, decisions, and interactions are veils to the truth, to the awareness of the *rahmat*, the *salām* the *sabur* or Allah Swt.

With acceptance of our limitations, the veil becomes translucent. Like a scrim in a theater, you can't see detail, but you can see what is behind it. The veils remain, yet the intensity of the light reveal the kindness and mercy of Allah Swt as we strive to comprehend what is before us. Just that striving provides the experience of Allah's overwhelming kindness and gentility, power and mercy, despite our worries, and at times even, despite our fearful denial.

The Analogy of Parenthood

There is another analogy that might help us understand this aphorism and the juxtaposition of power and gentleness, of compelling and choice, of subduing and kindness. Many of us have children, and we are in a position of great power in their lives. Sometimes, we tell our child, "My darling, you can't do this now. You are too young. But when you get older, you will be able to do it." It is the exerting of power, yet told with gentleness and kindness. As the sweetness of kindness accompanies the exerting of

power, the subtleties of trust, patience, security are present to override the frustration that the child may be experiencing. Moreover, with the assistance of the parent to accomplish whatever the task may be, the child feels happy and loved, because he or she accomplished what they wanted to accomplish. The child learns to accept assistance given with love

When assistance comes and is accepted, at the right moment (*waqt*), there is success, and it is taken in part to be one's own achievement. With this type of loving relationships, we can slowly realize that we are acting and truly living and breathing by the Will of Allah Swt and in the Presence of Allah Swt. As al-Qur'an reminds us in Suratu-r-Rūm:

It is Allah who created you and then sustained you, and then will cause you to die and then will give you life again. (30:40)

Allaahu-lladhee khalaqakum thumma razaqakum thumma yumeetukum thumma yuhyeekum.

What Shaykh.Ibn Ata'illah Iskandari is guiding us to experience is that even before we attain to that level of understanding, where we automatically see our denial, feel the Divine power and the kindness of Allah Swt reducing our concerns and frustrations, we already have the knowledge of how transformative trust can be, which is especially important at this time of a crisis in trust.

Let me give you an example from my own life. I recently learned that in Morocco there is a kind of scorpion that if you are stung by it, you will be dead in 6 hours. When I was in the desert there I was walking around with my children, picking up stones. It didn't occur to me, even after all the years of travel and countries I have visited, that there could have been scorpions under the stones. I was just out picking up beautiful stones. Had someone warned me, "Be careful, there are scorpions," I would have picked up those stones differently. I would have trusted both their knowledge and their concern,

and the fact they considered it a duty to warn me.

Knowledge may not remove the potential threat or pitfall, but it will, if listened to and respected, change our approach to circumstances, to life, and even become an example to share with others, as I am doing right now. But each one of us has to listen and accept, or at the very least entertain, the possibility of truth contained in what is before us. We have to be open to the signs of Allah, as He says in Suratu Fussilat:

“We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this [Message] is the Truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is watching over all things?” (41:53)

Sanureehim aayaatinaa fi-l-’aafaqi wa fee ańfusihiim hattaa yatabayyana lahum annahu-l-haqqu awa lam yakfi birabbika annahu ‘alaa kulli shay’iń shaheed^a

While we can intellectually grasp the importance of seeing and accepting Allah’s Truth, the way to really grasp the meaning depends upon our ability to understand our state of servitude/*abd*, and embrace it. If we can begin to accept the reality of the power of the All-Powerful (Al Qahhar) as that Power interfaces with our life, we can begin understand these aphorisms. Of course, the Rabb/Lord has lordship over us; of course, the Merciful is more kind to us than we have kindness in our hearts. But what the Shaykh is telling us is that whatever we might think of as a setback, a denial, or a lack of response can actually be a sign of moving forward.

Just like there are things we keep from our children because they are not able to understand them (due to experience, age, maturity), so too, Allah Swt veils certain aspects of reality from our sight. Just as we understand that we deny certain knowledge or activities to our children—not because we want to punish them, or withhold knowledge from them, or to show our power over them, or because we don’t care for them—but for precisely the opposite reason: because we respect the importance of the knowledge, because we know there is a context for the information, because we care so very much.

So too, we must set aside our arrogance or our assumptions of entitlement, and trust that Allah Swt reveals to us what is appropriate at the right time and in the right circumstance.

“Inallaha ma’ a sāberīn.”

Perhaps we can also see this in another way. Everything is available to be seen at any time, but we have to attain a state of readiness and have the will (*irada*) and the intention (*niyyah*) and the yearning (*himmah*), and the spiritual maturity to actually see, and furthermore to understand what is available. It is always there, but we cannot see it or attain it until Allah deems us ready. For that to happen, trust, submission, and attention must be present. To see the Divine Presence requires humility and trust.

So, if we understand withholding and giving in the parent-child relationship, why don't we understand, then, when certain things are denied to us by Allah Swt? I don't mean just material things, but other things. Even, for example, when we are ill and the health is denied to us, when we are denied financial stability or apparent spiritual progress. Why do we have so much fear? Why do we have so much concern and worry when we know that the denier is Allah?

We say, “I don't understand why I didn't get that contract. I don't understand why I didn't win that person's affection. I don't understand why.” We might even say, “What did I do wrong?” Or “I deserve that more than other people deserve it.” We can even say, “I'm doing this for the sake of Allah, and yet, still I didn't get it. O Allah, why did you do this to me?” This is a very, very hard veil to see through, because we have to understand that our intention and our will go only so far. It still has to be approved.

To remember this is not just about having faith, it means understanding and finding comfort and ease in knowing that, ultimately, the goal of this journey is to be aware of the Divine Presence and to lift the veil of ignorance and separation. We are reminded that this is not an easy task, but it is a worthwhile one. Remembrance is a healing balm, a lullaby that brings peace, words of love that calm the fears and feed the heart's hunger for peace.

Holding on to this understanding and the behavior that sustains it is like holding water in the hand, all you get is a wet hand. It slips out of your fingers very quickly. So we must refine our vessel, create a water-tight receptacle. Our heart's capacity for love and submission, for trust and patience is what was provided by the Creator as the only vessel for this purpose. As the Hadith Qudsi tells us, **“Allah, Most High said: *The heavens and the earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of a true believer can.*”**

Cosmic GPS and the 94th Aphorism

As we seek to grasp this lesson, let us not forget the greater subject that we are not discussing today, and which we have discussed in previous symposia, the subject of *qadr* and *tadbīr*. It is not presumptuous for us to link together these two texts (the Hikam and the Isqat ul Tadbīr) by this one *wali 'ullah*. As we discuss these texts, we must remember not to make common epistemological or ontological assumptions that impose a human sense of time and causality on Divine Reality. There is, in non-linear science, the possibility of simultaneous, apparently disparate realities. We will leave that to another time, but I mention it only to help us to not be limited by our assumptions or the underlying mental narrative that Allah Swt must act in humanly understandable ways.

There is a saying of Hazrat Ali (ra) that beautifully illustrates the acceptance of the vastness of Allah's plan. Hazrat Ali said: **“*When we say something and it happens, we are made happy once. However, when it does not happen or occur, we are ten times more happy.*”** The understanding of deprivation expressed by Hazrat Ali in this quote is based on his faith and his knowledge, and on his state of servant-hood and submission. He had the faith to say and to understand that everything in this whole universe and in all the universes is by the Will of Allah Swt, pre-determined by Allah Swt; consequently, it is our *qadr*, our fate—including what we are able to do and what we are not able to do. This includes what we are capable of doing and what we are not capable of doing; it includes all of our wisdom and all of our ignorance.

This leads us to the **next aphorism, the 94th** in which Iskandari writes:

Deprivation (al-man) hurts you only because of the lack of your understanding of Allah's presence in it.

In this aphorism, he is pointing us to the reality that it is our relative wisdom or ignorance that determines our understanding of, and our response to, a deprivation. Each sense of “deprivation” is an opportunity for us to know that we do not fully know, and thus relatively where we are at any given moment and the direction we are heading. It is a cosmic GPS, if you will. If we take the time to learn and absorb the way of Allah Swt, if we are attuned (i.e. in a state of pursuit of knowledge and remembrance), and if we are embracing and sustaining that remembrance of Allah Swt, and if we recognize when we deviate from the course, then in every moment we are correcting our course.

Just like when we are driving our car and we use our GPS. Every moment the GPS is correcting our course: “recalculating, recalculating.” Why? Because either we made a mistake or we decided to go against the “will of the GPS.” I say to myself: “I know better. I’ve done this before. I know another route. I wouldn’t choose this route.” We don’t have faith in the GPS, so instead we calculate based only on our experience and ego and habit to control all that is around us.

Sometimes we are tempted to say, “I wonder if I can take a short cut this way or that way.” “Well, I am an adventurer...” Believe me, there are plenty of adventures on this path, plenty of challenges, without deviating from the well trodden path: “*sha’ar*.” It takes real courage to obey to trust and to attribute our knowledge correctly to its Source.

What we have to remember is that, in every moment Allah knows all the outcomes, the seen and the unseen, as He tells us in Suratu-l-Hashr:

“He is Allah, than Whom there is no god but Him, Knower of the Unseen and the Seen. He is the Universally Merciful and the Singularly Compassionate” (59:22).

Huwa-Llaahu-lladhee laa ilaaha illaa huwa ʿaalimu-l-ghaybi wa-sh-shahaadati huwa-r-Rahmaan-u-r-Raheem.

But we, who cannot see all ends, are given opportunities to choose. Things are withheld from us or given to us, not to teach us a lesson, but because we are operating in time and because in linear time there is the appearance of cause / effect. So what appears to be withheld is a factor of our level of perception, our ability to see. But, unfortunately, most people attribute human ‘intention’ to Allah’s Swt will/*irāda*. They assume that Allah wants “to teach us a lesson,” in some paternalistic way. The first lesson being that life is a lesson; everything in life is an ‘*āyat’ullah*, including the failures.

Iskandari affirms this in the 96th aphorism:

“A disobedience that bequeaths humiliation and extreme need is better than an obedience that bequeaths self-infatuation and pride.”

The Internal Gyroscope

When we are totally immersed, totally engrossed in *our* own planning and choosing, we are putting blinders over our eyes, we cannot see how humiliation or extreme need can be a gift from Allah. We are absent from the *basīra*, the insight.

But when we execute our plan according to the will of Allah, the guidance of Allah Swt, our eyes are clear and unclouded. Praiseworthy planning, *hamd*, with gratitude/*shukr* keeps us in balance and leads us to the nearness, to the happiness, and the pleasure of Allah Swt, but not pleasure as we normally define or understand pleasure, rather the subtle pleasure of harmony. When we are trying to keep balanced with the will of Allah, the insight is operating and our vision is more correct, because we are looking through the corrective lens of Al Qur’an, the Hadith, the life of the Prophet Muhammad (saws), and the *hikmat* of the *auliyā*.

“How do I know if I am seeing clearly?” we might ask. Allah has given us an internal gyroscope; this gyroscope is called love. He put this love inside of us; every time

we deviate from it, we will feel increased resistance, a counter force trying to correct our course. And every time we attend to that love, seek it out and embrace it, we feel the force of that love grows and guides us towards its source. The more we are turned toward it, the stronger that attraction/*jedhbah* grows.

But, as the Shaykh reminds us in the aphorisms, you will have pleasures and successes, but you will also have loss, and separation, and challenges. What we don't see is that all those are gifts and guidance from Allah. We have all had the experience that we have been looking for something that is right in right before our eyes. "Where did I put that? Where did I put that? I can't find it. I can't find it." And then we realize, it was right there! We overlooked it and then we say, "Oh, how did I miss that?"

This is not just a circumstance of old age ('my senior moments!'); we are born with it. The baby is crying, crying, crying. The milk is right there in front of her face. Crying, crying, and crying, as if to say, "Where is the milk?" Allah provides. Similarly to that newborn baby, we put a lot of energy into striving for what has already been decreed for us and guaranteed for us by Allah. Sustenance is provided by our adherence to the path, as He says in Suratu-dh-Dhariyat:

"Surely Allah is He Who is the Provider (Ar-Razzaqu), the Possessor of Unshakeable Might" (51:58).

Inna-Llaaha huwa-r-razzaaqu dhuu al-quwwati-l-mateen.

If we want the sustenance of Allah, there is a clear path to it. But if we are negligent, if we do not follow that path, it is proof of loss of our *basīra*, our insight. It is spiritual macular degeneration. There is the swift kind and there is the slower kind. But when Allah Swt wants to open and illuminate a person's inner sight, He engages us in life. When the eyes of our heart are open, we will see that there is assistance in the deprivation and difficulties, not because the assistance wasn't there before, but because now you can see Allah's presence in it. The change in your attitude has opened your eyes. With this kind of sight you can understand the deep meaning of Iskandari's

aphorisms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me share with one last aphorism:

“Sometimes He gives while depriving you, and sometimes He deprives you in giving (#83).”

As I have said today, usually, we don't see the Divine Presence in what we are being deprived of. Things that are withheld cause us unhappiness because we don't understand the meaning or the reason for why it is being withheld. We think that in order for it to be from Allah, we have to understand why it is being withheld.

Through dedicating ourselves to being a servant of Allah, we gain not only intellectual understanding (something one acquires along the way), but we also gain a comprehension of what the purpose of our life is, what Allah's Swt intention is, or if you will, what the Greater reality is. This greater understanding is a recognition that, “If I submit to that direction, the instruction of Allah, then I will understand why these circumstances are happening, while they are happening, because they are correctives, and reminders.”

That is *fah(a)m*, comprehension. It is not just understanding, but comprehending the meaning. With *fah(a)m*, we recognize that sometimes we are given things because of our acts of disobedience. Opportunities are given to us to gain strength, to gain character and to repent. All of these build character, and sometimes they are given to us because of our acts of obedience and trust.

But sometimes, Iskandari is telling us, *even* an act of disobedience is a blessing, because if the act of disobedience causes pain or difficulties or illness or second thoughts, that may stop us from going further astray. So those difficulties are really blessings. This helps us correct ourselves and get back on the path. So we have to look at the long range view.

I can list a thousand mistakes I have made and a thousand things I would do differently in my life. But would I really do them differently? Only if I really had the ability to reflect. Do they have an effect on how I do things in the future? Certainly. When you look at the long range view, we can see that the more a servant we have become, the more trusting, willing, and obedient we are, [then] the more we have kept our *basīra*, the more we have kept on the path, and the less we find it necessary to justify and deviate.

The degree to which we are not thinking we are in control is the degree that we are in submission to Allah, or to part of that reality or universal system or truth that is Allah. And as we strive in *jihad al akbar*, as we strive to stay on the path, we find that our *adab* increases, our servant-hood increases, our love of Allah increases, because we realize that everything that happens in our life is for our benefit. How do you know it is for your benefit? Because you want it to be, *you allow it to be*. This is the ultimate use of our consciousness and gift of choice. The choice to submit and trust in Allah Swt. That is our *niyyat*, that is our intention, that is our will, and that is what we must be committed to, even though we may fail a hundred times or a thousand times. *Insh'Allah*, we have explored the perspective that can unlock the meanings, but more so the attitude we need for the world we live in, to reach the destination we long for.

CLOSING DU'A:

Allahumma salle 'ala sayeddina Muhammed al fatih oghliq wa-al Hatim limaa-sabaq naser al haqq bil haqq wa-al haadi ila siratiqa-l-mustaqeem, wa ala alehi wa sahbehi haqq qadrihi wa miqdarihi al adheem.

O Allah, shower your blessings upon our master Muhammad, The Opener of what has been closed and the seal of what has passed, the Champion of Truth by the Truth, and the Guide to Your straight path, and on his family and his companions with the equivalent to the greatness due to his exalted status.