

December 20, 2008

Saturday

Title: [What Is Beneficial Knowledge?](#)

DVD title: Beneficial Knowledge  
Tafsir on an Aphorism of Ibn At'ala Askandari

*Dinner blessing:* O Allah, we ask You for the blessings of Your *shifāt*. Give us insight into the temporality of this physical world and the eternity with you in peace, youth, and happiness and contentment. In this time of traveling, we ask You for Your protection upon those who are traveling. At this time when there is loss in the hearts of those among us, we ask You for patience and perseverance, and in that perseverance, to accede to Your *tadbīr*. For all those who prepared this meal, may the light of Your love and *rizq* come into their lives. *Amin*.

*Sohbet:* In one of the aphorisms of Ibn At'ala Askandari, he says, “*Beneficial knowledge is that which expands the breast with its rays, and by it, the veils of the heart are lifted.*” Most commentators, and I’ll talk about some of the commentary, don’t pay attention to or comment on the word “beneficial.” They go right to “knowledge.” I’ve read 3 out of the 5 commentaries there are, and nobody talks about beneficial. We all know what beneficial means. There is an assumption by talking about what “beneficial knowledge” is as a phrase. Because we know what beneficial means, we can say that “beneficial knowledge” is such and such. To me, there is something which is a subtext of all sincere Sufic activities that is captured by the concept of beneficial.

That is, a person who would walk this path would have the will/*irāda*, and the *niyyat*/intention, and the awareness to perform acts and strive to live their life with the knowledge that [life] is constructed by Allah to be a contained journey toward awareness,

awakening, toward the infinite, toward the Almighty, toward the truth, toward reality. But [it is] dependent on our choices, and our consciousness. Consequently, that which would benefit us would be knowledge and actions which would not only encourage us but sustain us, and focus us, and affirm that journey. Beneficial also implies its opposite, that there are things that are not of benefit to us. Beneficial knowledge implies there is knowledge that is not beneficial to us. That could be maybe disputed by one who understands if we are talking about *‘ilm/* knowledge of the Divine. All knowledge of the Divine would be beneficial. Also, the argument could be made that knowledge of things that are not beneficial, is beneficial: knowing what is not beneficial has a benefit.

Beneficial knowledge in the sense of awareness, information, forms of action, knowledge of alternatives, knowledge of means would be knowledge that would sustain us and direct us and fulfill us on this *sair ul suluk*, this spiritual journey that each one of us is created to traverse if we are able to and aware of it, and have the right means and guidance. One commentator, Ibn Abad Arunda (a Shadhili saint), in his commentary on the Hikam, said in part that “*beneficial knowledge is the knowledge of Allah, His attributes and names, and the knowledge by which one knows how to submit to Him and act properly in regard to His favor,*”—*adab* in terms of one’s *rizq*, *fadl*, and *nai’ma*.

The second part of the quotation in the Hikam is, “*Which expands the breast with its rays.*” It invokes an interesting visual, like when the rays of the sun touches a closed flower, it opens (expands) it. Or when it touches the dew, expands it and raises it as droplets of water into the air. It lightens it; enlightens it. Or, [it is like] how rays of light expand your vision as they illuminate a dark place, thereby expanding your knowledge of that place; your awareness of what was heretofore in that darkness. In the last metaphor, it explains the next part of the sentence: “*And by it, the veils of the heart are lifted.*” When the rays of knowledge touch the heart... just as when they touch a closed flower or

dewdrop, or darkness in a room, when they touch the heart, the veils of the heart are lifted off the heart.

When Ibn Abad (ra) says, “*Beneficial knowledge is knowledge of Allah, His attributes, His names, and the knowledge by which one knows how to submit to Him, and act properly in regard to His favors,*” there is an awful lot in that one sentence. First of all, he doesn’t really explain what he means by knowledge. The assumption is we know what is meant. But knowing, recognizing, by the light of those, by the light of a certain type of knowledge, we recognize the attributes of Allah Swt, His names and attributes. More than that, it’s not just recognizing the presence of the names and attributes of Allah. It has within it, in his explanation, the recognition of the need to submit to it, and to act humbly in light of the favors of Allah Swt.

The essence of these characteristics of Allah (compassion, mercy, love, patience, perseverance, peace, the 99 Names of Allah), evoke a kind of humility in us; therefore, he implies that there is a way of telling whether the knowledge is beneficial or not. We imply it from the result of being in His presence, just like the veils of the heart are lifted, as he says, “*lifting from the heart its veils and dispelling all doubts and misgivings.*” If we accept the knowledge that comes to us, and it is truly beneficial knowledge, this is knowledge that is coming from an awareness. Later we learn that all these things come from Allah. Allah is sending this knowledge to us and one of the signs is that our doubts and our misgivings are dispelled. One of the signs is the veils of separation are lifted.

These saints were well aware of the Torah and Injil. This aphorism reflects a statement by the Prophet Daoud (as) who said, “*The knowledge in the breast is like the lantern in the house.*” There is a kind of knowledge that brings light, that illuminates the darkness, as I would say in my own little *tafsir*. The question also rises whether this knowledge is

collective, accrued knowledge. It may very well be. But Abu Muhammad Abdul Aziz al Mahdawi (ra) in a commentary said, “*Beneficial knowledge is knowledge of the moment, ‘ilm al waqt.*” [It is] clarity, not of the mind only, but clarity of the heart. He also said that it is *zhud*, asceticism, removing oneself from the world. It is a knowledge that brings one closer to the paradise, the Jannah, and further from Jahannam, from the fire. It’s the knowledge that kindles a fear/*khawf* of Allah, while at the same time realizing that you are returning to Him due to that fear. Did you ever have a situation where you had to return to some place you had anxiety about returning to?

And he says, “*And the pestilence/afā’t of the heart and its purification.*” Beneficial knowledge has a kind of transformational, alchemical effect. It has the effect of *atazkiya*/ purification and refinement. When you come into contact with certain knowledge, light, and illumination, you can’t avoid its purifying effect on you. It’s like seeing something right in your face; you can’t avoid it, like looking at the sun. You can’t avoid the blinding light of the sun. The truth is evident, and it’s undeniable. It’s not just the truth as fact, but it is transformative. He goes on to say, “*It is a specifically designated light (nur) that Allah Swt places in the heart of whoever He pleases. Not knowledge of the tongue that is transmitted and apprehensible by the mind.*” Of course, scholars go off on tangents trying to understand with the mind something that can only be understood with the heart. To understand it by the heart, you have to have a certain *adab* and humility. And you have to have a certain knowledge of the attributes of Allah, the names of Allah; and more than that, you have to submit to it.

There’s a difference between a person who is a Muslim (submitted), and a person who is really submitted, a person who really allows themselves the opportunity to experience real knowledge, real wisdom, and real insight. Indeed, almost every commentator talks about it as light that is placed in the heart of the individual. It is a light Allah Most High

places in the heart. Junayd talks about it as the light by which you know your Lord. You can't know your Lord through your mind; you know your Lord through the light. Ibn At'ala Askandari (ra), in this simple aphorism, tells us what the objective of knowledge is to a Sufi, which is knowing that Divine presence, *marifah*, and acting in the best way with regard to the favors Allah Swt has given us. We learn in other aphorisms and texts and in the Qur'an and from the Hadith, that the favors of Allah are many.

We learn from Suratu Rahman: **“Which is it of the favors of your Lord do you deny?”** These are favors that are both apparently positive and easily embraced, and one is easily grateful for. And there are favors that are tests and trials, that are not so easy to be grateful for. But it is specifically this knowledge—making your heart available to that light, emerging and submerging oneself in that light, without trying to mask yourself from it, without trying to put a veil between you and that knowledge—that is necessary and recommended for a person to understand and benefit from. If you can have that gratitude and if you have that submission, and if you have that love of God, of course you are going to benefit from it. That's why you call it beneficial knowledge.

But I started somewhere differently. I started with trying to understand the word “beneficial.” So we come back to that at the end. We have to reconstruct our own consciousness about what is beneficial and what is not beneficial. As long as we only assign benefit to the things of the material world; as long as we see benefit only coming from getting what we want, being right, being in power, being safe and secure in the physical world, then we are never going to understand what beneficial means. We are never going to benefit fully from life. When we take tragedies or losses out of the context of the greater reality, we are not going to benefit from those tragedies and losses. We are just going to mourn them and grieve over them.

We have this very spiritual life over here; a person can be studying Qur'an 10 hours a day, making *du'ā* another 5 hours a day, and putting their head on the mat on a regular basis. But you have to make a linkage between that and the circumstances of life.

Whatever we gain by all the good practices and work we have done needs to be available to us in situations of loss, tragedy, illness, or poverty, so that indeed, we understand that Allah Swt wants us to benefit even from that circumstance, that there's provision in that. All these things are resolved in eternity; but we are not aware we are living in eternity. So we look in the shorter vision. We feel that maybe culturally, ethnically, or emotionally we are not being proper if we are not miserable under certain circumstances, or we don't understand our misery, and attenuate it with knowledge and gratitude. Those are mostly cultural things.

Then we elevate culture above our *dīn*, and above the truth. When that happens, then you have genocide and all kinds of wars and tribal difficulties, arrogance and limitations to society—as soon as you elevate culture above law, above knowledge, above your religion, your *dīn*, Islam, spirituality. Allah Swt wants us to identify with His names. Allah's system is such that we should identify with the names and attributes of Allah, not just with our ethnicity or tribe, or even the religion itself, which is why the Prophet (sal) said, ***“I didn't come to bring a new religion.”*** We should identify with the attributes and qualities, not with the geography or ethnicity. But when you do that, there are many forces that try to bring you back to the norm, forces within one's own family. They don't like you deviating from the norm of the family, or in one's community or tribe or nationality.

The only thing that is real in this world has a name to it. That's why Allah Swt told Hazrat Adam the names of things. Things in the other world have no names; the angels didn't know the names. When Allah created the world, He gave names. The only things

that are real in this world are the names Allah has given: the 99 attributes of Allah. That's what is real. That is what we should identify with. This black person, this yellow person, this brown person, this tall person and this short person, this woman or this man, this person who speaks a foreign language or people who speak my language—we should identify them by their compassion, not by their language, by their mercy, by their patience, by their love, by their leadership ability, by their justice and equity. That's how we should identify one another. When we do that, then we are seeing the Divine presence in front of us. Then the *'ilm al waqt* in that moment is operating. The knowledge in that moment is beneficial to us. We are gaining value. We are benefiting from that. Indeed, we are the beneficiary of those names and attributes. We are the beneficiary of Allah's command, will, and testament to us; of the *'ālam al amr* in the *'ālam al khalq*, the world of creation. Such is what can be found in one aphorism. *Asalāmu aleikum*.