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Wednesday

Title: [See the Power and Kindness of Allah in What Is Denied to You](#)

DVD title: See His Kindness Even When He Uses His Power to Deny
Tafsir on the 93rd Aphorism of Askandari

As we dive deeper into the teachings of Ibn At'ala Askandari, we find an incredible treasure of knowledge. In modern terms, we might say that often we find exactly what we might think is the opposite of what we thought before—a rival hypothesis. I think it's very important that we see that in the world we are living in today, especially if we believe in and encourage critical thinking and inquiry as a form of progress. I don't want to say "progressive," because it has a connotation of certain topics. But when we make progress, we want to be able to think outside the box in a way. You can pretty well touch the heart of the Hikam in any place. Tonight we'll talk about aphorisms that point this out.

In the 93rd aphorism in Chapter 10 of the Hikam of Ibn At'ala Askandari, translation by Danner, he says:

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

It's very difficult for most of us to see the mercy and kindness of Allah Swt when we are denied what it is we think we either need, deserve or expect. It can be in the material world, or in the physical realm of our own health and well being. It can be in the form of

power. Ibn At'ala Askandari is telling us that this denial itself is an affirmation, an 'āyat of the power of Allah Swt—the fact that we don't have final say. This is the action of Al Qahharu. Then he goes on and says that He is showing you His kindness when He deprives you; but He also is showing you His power. So in both the kindness (*bir*) and power (*qahhar*) Allah is showing us His presence. This is another means through which Allah Swt discloses the Divine presence. The fact is we are in a dynamic process, part of a dynamic reality that can compose power and kindness in the form of denial – or even kindness in the form of denying – which is contrary to the way we normally think.

He goes on and says in this aphorism that not only is Allah Swt making us aware of that Divine presence—or I would rather say, where we are in reality, the reality of our state, not what it feels like we are in, or “this is where I feel I am,” or “this is my experience,” but the absolute reality of our state, within *tawhid*, within the unity of Allah—in addition to that, He is coming near to us in this process with that loving kindness, with His gentility and gentleness. *Bīr* also means gentleness. We don't think about being denied something, or shown the limit of our own power by the overriding power of Allah Swt, or Reality, as gentleness or kindness. The overriding power of Allah Swt/Reality is, in a sense, telling us “What you thought is reality is not. What your expectation is, and what you interpret is reality, is not what is going to happen.” It's not reality. So abandon your expectations. This of course reflects back other teachings of Askandari on *tadbīr*.

The fact that there are denials of either our desires, apparent needs, apparent conclusions even, our apparent actions and decision making process by the Reality, as opposed to the self-deception, by the absolute truth as opposed to the distorted truth that we might see, is part of the story of life, not only as a generalization, but as part of the specific narrative of the life of a Sufi, of a seeker, of one who is on the *sair ul suluk*. As we accept this overriding reality—or you could say, as we accept Allah, as we accept Al Qahharu, as we

accept Haqq, as we accept Al Bīr, the gentle, kind one—we are in a very progressive or progressed state of our spiritual journey. This 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 that Divine presence and kindness in most situations, but not in all. It's all relative in the journey.

Just the fact that [though] one can not accept it intellectually, but [still can] find repose in it, find refuge in it and even contentment in it, even occasionally, is a sign of progress. Because it is, again, what we don't expect. That is, what have heretofore been veils themselves become agents of revelation for us: recognizing the inconsistencies of our reasoning, recognizing the limitations of our understanding, recognizing the element of desire and temptation in our actions, recognizing the selfishness in our actions, our decisions, and our interactions. All of which are veils to the truth. All of which are filters to the truth, to the absolute awareness of the Divine presence. They, themselves, become revelatory.

The veils become like a theater scrim. You can light it from behind or from the front. If you light it from behind, you can see what's behind the scrim projected on the front. If you light it from the front, then it acts as a block. You can't see behind it. The veil/hijab, in and of itself, no longer conceals anything. It becomes almost transparent, translucent—opaque like a scrim. It's there, but you can see the shadow of the reality that is behind it. We've all seen dancers behind the scrim in theater. You can't see the faces or the detail, but you know clearly what they are doing. The scrim separates the action from the forestage. In theater it can be used in a dream sequence, something in the past. Or [it can be used for] something happening somewhere on the stage with something that is happening in another location [on the stage], and you see them both simultaneously. It's a good metaphor for reality.

The veil itself reveals the kindness and mercy of Allah Swt as we submit and surrender to the fact that there is this overriding power. And there is this overwhelming kindness, gentility, even in denial. We can make another analogy, which is a parent telling a child, “My darling, my sweetheart, you can’t do this now. You are too young. But when you get older, you will be able to do it.” It’s told with gentleness and kindness. “Oh, you’ve done so well. But you don’t have the ability yet to do this. Here, let me help you.” Then your power overrides the power of that child. The child is assisted, and it feels happy because it accomplished what it wanted to accomplish. If he/she could not accomplish it by themselves, it would have been a source of frustration. When you add yourself at the right moment, in the moment (*waqt*) you bring it to the level the child wants it to be at, and feels it is his/her accomplishment, too. The little child doesn’t say, “You did it, I didn’t do it, so I don’t want it,” unless you teach the child to do that. The child now feels a collective accomplishment.

This insight is not just a singular insight. It is progressive, successive. What Askandari is guiding us to understand, is that even before we attain to that level of realization, to that level of understanding where automatically this is how we see denial, and how we see overriding power, we now have this knowledge that this is what happens. I say to you, “You are going to such and such a place. Look out for this. Be aware of this. If you are not aware of this, you could be in danger.” I was watching a television program, “Man Against Nature.” He was in Morocco, and there is one kind of scorpion that if you are stung by it, you will be dead in 6 hours. I was thinking, when I was in the desert there 2 years ago I was walking around the desert with the children, picking up stones. It didn’t occur to me that there could have been scorpions under the stones. I was just out picking up beautiful stones for the kids. We’d drive off the road, get out of the car between Marakesh and Essaouira, and pick up stones. Had someone said to me, “Be careful, there

are scorpions,” I would have picked up those stones differently.

We are always interacting with the fullness of Allah’s creation. In reality, we are interacting with all the unseen forces and powers all the time. So we need these warnings. Isn’t that why the Prophet Mohammed (sal) was called a warner? He was a messenger and a warner. There are things that are known that we don’t know. The point being what? Even if you haven’t arrived at that state, you have been told; therefore, if you accept what you have been told, coming from a reliable source, you act differently. You think differently. It’s not that I would not have picked up stones; but I would have had to make other decisions. That information would have rivaled my assumptions from my other conditioning, from where I came from; from what I knew previously, what I had been told. Had I been told, I at least would have looked differently.

We can’t say, when we hear these things about what is a Sufi and what is progress, that “I have no chance of getting there. I’m not there yet; therefore, forget it.” Just even the fact that we are told the lesson is an indication of achieving a certain level. The fact that we absorb it, or accept it as coming from a reliable source, is very important. It’s a sign. I’m not telling you this just to make you feel better. This is the teaching. This is the truth. It’s not one day you don’t know and the next day you know. It’s not that you challenge whatever it is that is there. But you live a certain life in a certain way. Part of the teaching is also to teach us how to live our life, how to divide up our time; how to do our prayer; how to be in the *ummah*—many things—how to make *tajrīd*, how to detach ourselves from certain things, and attach ourselves to other things. If you take that part of the teaching, along with the perceptions, you have a full teaching.

So therefore, what he is telling us, by extension, whenever there is something we might think is a setback, a denial, or a lack of response, or the response we didn’t expect, it’s

actually a movement forward. We can intellectually understand that. The way we can really grasp it is to understand our state of servanthood, ‘*abd*. If we can understand that of course, the All-Powerful has power over us; of course, the Rabb, the Lord has lordship over us; of course, the Merciful is more kind to us than we have kindness in our hearts—of course. As we keep certain things from our children because they are not yet able, or at the right age, the proper state of mind, or have the proper information to understand some things, we also understand that we do that, not because we want to punish them, not because we want to withhold knowledge from them, not because we want to show our power over them, or because we don’t care for them, but for precisely the opposite reason.

It’s because we respect the knowledge, because we know there is a context for the information, because we do care about that knowledge. Other knowledge will be built upon that, and if we have a weak foundation, then all of it could crumble. We try very much to provide the information and knowledge in an order that allows it to be absorbed, used, understood, and accepted, and have its moral and ethical equivalencies. That’s what we should do, at least. Indeed, it is because we are more caring, more concerned, more loving about our children than we are even about our own selves. We make sacrifices every day. The teachers sacrifice every day. They live a life of sacrifice for the children. We make sacrifices to take care of our elderly. We make sacrifices every day (and we talked about sacrifice on the Eid ul Adha, and what it really means) for others, more than we would do for our own selves. We do that, and we are a reflection.

We are one of the concentric rings when the stone is dropped into the pond of the system.

We do that naturally, assuming we are good and concerned people, because it is what is implanted in us. It is reflective of the Divine will. Why then don’t we understand when certain things are denied to us? I don’t mean just material things. Even when we are ill

and the health is denied to us in the moment. Why do we have so much fear? Why do we have so much concern and worry, when we know that the denier of that health is Allah? At least the information is given to us that it is by Allah, and supported by thousands of years of that affirmation by people much more wise than we are. It seems right, though it is contrary to certain aspects of our *nafs ammāra*. It does intellectually seem correct, and appears to be true. There are periodically exemplars that we can point to and say, “Here is someone who lived this life of that faith and belief;” therefore, we can realize and at least contemplate that Allah Swt is more caring for us than we are for our own selves, provides more for our welfare than we can provide for our own welfare, provides for us through the hands and labors of other human beings, who we don’t know, and who don’t know us.

I go back to Musa’s mother, since we love her so much. At one point, it was the best thing to put her in a facility, where people you didn’t know were providing certain care for her. So you went and spent a lot of time getting to know those people and communicating with those people. That’s you. But others put people in those facilities and walk away from it. Then you said, “That’s not good enough for my mother. Let me put here with people I do know, who have common values, and who I have seen prove what they can do.” Still, you are present. Still, you oversee it and play your role. It’s a whole other level. Think about the people who, for their own reasons, just to live, provide food for us. They don’t know who we are, and we don’t know who they are. Mr. Farmer out in Iowa who gives us potatoes, and Mrs. Farmer who gives us dates from California. Wonderful! Then we realize we still have to play a role in our own care giving.

As merciful as Allah Swt is, and how much He provides for us, we can’t grow dates and many other things for our own consumption. Then we find out they are watering those

plants with sewage. There needs to be oversight, standards, rules, someone overseeing. Some human beings are very greedy. Some have no care and concern for anything beyond their own self. Allah is the overseer of His slaves. Though we are taking provision by Allah, through people we don't know, those people can intervene in their providing (by Allah), and taint what they are providing for us. Still it is coming by Allah's will, but certain choices are being made along the way. There also needs to be oversight. People trust in the trust of someone else's trust of someone else's trust, but they don't trust [Allah]. They are not operating by the standard of Allah. Either you will trust in people or Allah, or in the people of Allah.

I'll use the example: you see how many billions of dollars this man Madoff made off with. What happened? It's not just rich people who lost their money. Foundations collapsed. They were helping millions of people, and they collapsed. In one day, all gone, people who were working *fi sabīlillah*. How can that be? How can Allah allow it? Because in His denial, you find His mercy and His power and His gentleness. Don't tell me those people aren't more conscious today than they were yesterday. [There is] this idea that there is some one, some being, some reality, some power greater than us that cares for us more than we care for ourselves. We see it in the *anbiyā*, in the *awliyā*, in our *shuyukh*, and in our own parenting. For a long time, parents care for their children much more than the children care for themselves—sometimes well into adulthood. But this idea does not leave the realm of the *naḥs ammāra* easily. How do we know? 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?" but we don't really believe we did anything wrong. "I deserve that more than other people deserve it." We all say it. "Our organization deserves that more than others."

Beyond that we can even say, “I’m doing this for the sake of Allah, and still I didn’t get it. O Allah, why did you do this to me?” But that’s not the way it is. 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. When we get a grant for our organization, before it can even be bid on, the money has to be approved by Congress. In the systems human beings create, we create a reflection of this whole thing. I am not telling you that it is created for spiritual reasons. I’m not saying the most altruistic human beings created this system so only the best things can happen. We naturally create forms and systems that reflect the greater form and system: oversight, approval.

The child comes to the parent and wants something; needing the approval to do something. If they don’t get the approval they might say, “So and so’s mother / father lets them do it!” That’s what the average child does. *Alhamdulillah*, I have to tell you, I don’t think I’ve ever heard that here. Maybe it is thought; but it is not articulated. There is a basic assumption that I believe our children have, that we are really trying to do our best for them. Is that not an assumption we can have about Allah? It is. And we must remember ultimately that this journey to be aware of the Divine presence is itself a veil to be lifted. Why? Simply said, the Divine presence by definition is present. It’s not called the Divine later, the Divine over there, the Divine tomorrow, or the Divine absent. We are not seeking the Divine absent. We say, “Seek the Divine presence.” *“Main apne Qalb ko zak pak kiteraf mutawajjeh karta hoom. Mere Qalb per quwwata qahar ka fai’z mere Qalb me a’e. I pay attention to my heart, and my heart pays attention to the Divine presence as the power (quwwat al qahhar) of Allah Swt. May my heart be filled with that Divine presence.”*

The next aphorism I should comment on tomorrow: *deprivation (al man) hurts you only because of the lack of your understanding of the Divine presence.* It is saying that what is

being held back from you upsets you only because you don't understand what Allah means by withholding it. We'll talk about that tomorrow, *insh'allah*. *Asalāmu aleikum*.

Q&A

Student: In the Qur'an there are many physical descriptions of Jannah. Are these metaphors? Why are the descriptions so linear and physical, if Jannah is not something that can be comprehended by us?

Shaykh: You just answered your own question. If I were to describe something in words you couldn't relate to, how would it have any meaning to you? (Student: It is spoken in a way people can understand and relate to); and therefore, that's the way it will be for you until you learn another language or another framework [in which to understand it]. To a black man, Allah is black. To the Japanese, Allah is an American that the Japanese make better and package differently.

Student: There seems to be a fine line between accepting what has been denied and continuing to make effort for it, or sometimes to wait.

Shaykh: Is impatience effort? Doesn't it take will to be patient? Absence of will is patience? I don't think so. Remember that old prayer, "I will with my will; my will is Thy will." Our will is the will of Allah. Whatever our will is, that's what Allah has given us. It all comes from Allah. You have to make an effort to make no effort, some times. This is choosing not to choose, planning not to plan. We'll come back to that. This is the essential gift of Allah Swt to the living being: consciousness and will. When that is gone, you are in the ground, and then it's all reflective. What is your religion? What is your book? Who is your prophet? [It is] all reflective.

Student: How do you determine the line between His will and our will?

Shaykh: That's the question everybody always asks, and that is the issue. How do you know where Allah's plan begins and yours ends? It's all Allah's plan. It's how do you recognize Allah's plan. The whole point is, in what framework are you making decisions? Are you making decisions within the framework of what is already written?

I'll try to integrate that tomorrow into this subject. In Qur'an Allah says, "**And you do not even intend unless Allah intends for your intention.**" You may remember, I gave the example of holding water in your hand. The water all runs through your hand, but your hand is wet. The answer to this question is like water in your hand. It escapes you as soon as you hear it. The only hope you have is you know it because of the fact that your hand is wet. There was once water in my hand; it is still wet. When we come to the *maqam* where we really understand this, even though we fall back in our thinking, we don't fall back in our state. Even though we become unsure, worried, concerned from a momentary event, we resolve it back to this knowledge that we really can say, "*Allahu alim*" or "This is *fī sabīlillah*," or we say, "This is the *irāda* of Allah" or "the *tadbīr* of Allah." We come to that state where we realize everything is the *qadar* (*qadr*, *taqdīr*) of Allah.

In light of what I said tonight, knowing that you haven't even achieved the state makes you aware of it when you are in the state you are in. Being warned about the scorpion makes you aware of the possibility, so the veil is not really a veil. The veil is a testimony to the power and mercy of Allah, and the gentility of Allah. So we try to find comfort in what we know. *Asalām aleikum*.