

THE BOOK *of* WISDOMS

K I T Ā B A L - Ḥ I K A M
A Collection of Sufi Aphorisms

Shaykh Ibn ‘Aṭā’illāh al-Iskandarī

Translated by Victor Danner

With commentary Ikmāl al-Shiyam by

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Introduction by

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P R E S S

Publisher's Note

IN THE NAME OF ALLĀH Most Gracious Most Merciful. All praise is to Allāh Most High for allowing this work to come to print. White Thread Press undertook the project to edit and publish this valuable work several years ago. This is a work recommended by many of our sages as essential study for any seeker wanting to traverse the higher stations of the Path. It combines the profundity of Shaykh Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh al-Iskandarī's upliftingly beautiful aphorisms and Shaykh 'Abdullāh Gangōhī's lucid unwrapping and exposition of them in his *Ikmāl al-Shiyam*, meaning "to perfect the innate character or natural disposition."

We are immensely thankful to Andrew Booso for editing the entire commentary and remarkably heightening its lucidity to match the eloquence of Victor Danner's translation of the aphorisms. His preface provides details on the background of the Islamic spiritual path and how the *Ikmāl* fits into the corpus of spiritual writing of the Indian subcontinent. Shaykh al-Ḥadīth Mawlānā Zakariyyā Kāndhlawī wrote a detailed introduction to the original Urdu commentary. He discusses, in his unique and inspiring style, the life and spirituality of the commentator, Shaykh 'Abdullāh Gangōhī and provides a longer biography of Mawlānā Khalīl Aḥmad Sahāranpūrī. Mawlānā Khalīl Aḥmad was both his and Shaykh 'Abdullāh's spiritual guide in the Path and had translated the aphorisms of Shaykh Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh into Urdu. He was also responsible for inspiring his student Shaykh 'Abdullāh to pen this commentary on his translation. Shaykh Zakariyyā's lengthy introduction therefore adorns this English edition, as it provides much-needed insight into the scholarship behind the commentary.

We are indebted to Mawlānā Ismail Nakhuda for revising the translation of the introduction. The only addition we have made to it is to include the Gregorian dates with the Ḥijrī dates to better assist the Western reader in

placing the events discussed. The original South African translator's notes end with (trans.) while those by Shaykh Zakariyyā end with (sz). The remaining notes are by Mawlānā Ismail Nakhuda and remain unmarked.

The commentary *Ikmāl al-Shiyam* begins on page 89. The aphorisms are presented both in their original Arabic and English translation according to the subject-wise arrangement of Shaykh 'Alī Muttaqī. The commentary is interspersed after each. Ibn 'Āṭā'illāh no doubt had his reasons for arranging the aphorisms in the way he did. To facilitate their reading according to his original arrangement, the relevant numbering is provided in brackets with each aphorism according to the order they are found in Danner's work. The Arabic text of the aphorisms has been compared with Paul Nwyia's critical edition, although other editions were consulted when discrepancies were found in it. It has also been carefully vocalized and punctuated. Since the Arabic text is present, the interlinear transliterations of Arabic terms found in Danner's translation have been removed. All references to Qur'ānic verses both in Danner's translation (in brackets) and the commentary (in parentheses) have been added by us.

In closing, we would like to thank all those who have assisted in bringing this work to completion. In particular, I would like to thank our shaykh Mawlānā Yusuf ibn Sulayman Motala, who is one of the foremost inheritors of the *Ikmāl's* legacy today, and through whom I was first introduced to it. His valuable guidance was indispensable. May Allāh reward them all and the authors abundantly in this world and the next for providing this inspiration and may He make it a source of benefit for one and all.

ABDUR-RAHMAN IBN YUSUF MANGERA
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خَيْرُ الْعِلْمِ مَا كَانَتْ الْخَشْيَةُ مَعَهُ.

**The best knowledge is the one
accompanied by fear. [232]**

Fear [of Allāh] is to perceive, so to speak, the grandeur of Allāh in the heart. When knowledge is accompanied by this quality, it is the highest and most beautiful form of knowledge, as praised in Allāh's speech: *Indeed among His servants, it is but the learned who fear Allāh* (35:28). In order to be a possessor of knowledge, and not merely a carrier of information, one must be characterized by this fear. The sign of this spiritual state is a strict obedience to the Sacred Law. One must understand that fear, in the absence of obedience to the Sacred Law, is in reality non-existent.

A contrasting state of being is when one acquires “knowledge” while accompanied by worldly desire, such as the yearning for the flattery of wealthy people, or pride or neglect of the Hereafter. When this pitiful spiritual state is found in a person who is taken to be a religious scholar (*‘ālim*), then such a person is not to be counted among the inheritors of the Prophets.³



الْعِلْمُ إِنْ قَارَنَتْهُ الْخَشْيَةُ .. فَالْكَ، وَإِلَّا فَعَلَيْكَ.

**If fear is united with knowledge, then it is for
you; if not, then it is against you. [233]**

Knowledge that is accompanied with fear of Allāh is beneficial in both this world and the next, while “knowledge” that lacks such a quality will be harmful in both abodes.

True religious scholars are distinguished from pseudo-scholars by this inner quality of fear. The latter are devoid of fear on account of their pride, which is the result of having gained superficial “knowledge”: superficial, that is, due to the lack of spiritual purity.

³ A famous ḥadīth transmitted by Abū Dāwūd and Tirmidhī includes the statement: “The religious scholars are the heirs of the Prophets.” See Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī’s detailed exposition of this ḥadīth in *The Heirs of the Prophets*, trans. Zaid Shakir (Chicago: Starlatch, 2001).

ON REPENTANCE

كَيْفَ يُشْرِقُ قَلْبُ صُورِ الْأَكْوَانِ مُنْطَبِعَةً فِي مِرَاتِهِ؟ أَمْ كَيْفَ يَرِحَلُ إِلَى
 اللَّهِ وَهُوَ مُكَبَّلٌ بِشَهَوَاتِهِ؟ أَمْ كَيْفَ يَطْمَعُ أَنْ يَدْخُلَ حَضْرَةَ اللَّهِ وَهُوَ
 لَمْ يَتَطَهَّرْ مِنْ جَنَابَةِ غَفَلَاتِهِ؟ أَمْ كَيْفَ يَرْجُو أَنْ يَفْهَمَ دَقَائِقَ الْأَسْرَارِ
 وَهُوَ لَمْ يَتُبْ مِنْ هَفَوَاتِهِ؟

How can the heart⁴ be illumined while the forms of crea-
 tures are reflected in its mirror? Or how can it journey
 to God while shackled by its passions? Or how can it
 desire to enter the presence of God while it has not yet
 purified itself of the stain of its forgetfulness? Or how
 can it understand the subtle points of mysteries while it
 has not yet repented of its offenses? [13]

How can a heart become illumined when it has been consumed by love of worldly wealth, worldly reputation, offspring, property, idle thoughts and false hopes? A heart that is fettered night and day with the chains of base desires — such as constant and excessive preoccupation with food, garments, or family — cannot advance to Allāh Most High and the divine presence. Is it possible that a soiled heart can be permitted entrance into a pure court? A diseased heart is prohibited such an entry in the same way that a person in a major state of ritual impurity is not permitted into the pure arena of a mosque (*masjid*).⁵ Furthermore, a heart that has been afflicted in this manner cannot hope to comprehend mysteries and divine subtleties.

4 References to the “heart” in these contexts are allusions to the spiritual heart.

5 See Ibn Rushd’s *Distinguished Jurist’s Primer*, 1:49–50, for a discussion of the verdicts of various Islamic jurists on this issue.

For a spiritual light to settle in the heart, the darkness of illusions must be dispelled. When the diseased one has repented of his futility, then he may progress to a stage where he is endowed with the ability to understand divine mysteries.



لَا صَغِيرَةَ إِذَا قَابَلَكَ عَدْلُهُ، وَلَا كَبِيرَةَ إِذَا وَاجَهَكَ فَضْلُهُ.

**There is no minor sin when His justice
confronts you; and there is no major sin
when His grace confronts you. [50]**

Should Allāh's attribute of justice (*ʿadl*) be manifested on earth, dealing with us according to the strict criteria of such equity, the smallest of sins (*ṣaghīra*) would be treated as an enormity (*kabīra*). In truth, a minute action of disobedience to such a majestic and great Lord and Benefactor, whose grandeur is infinite and bounties are incalculable, justifies the application of complete punishment upon the disobedient one.

If, on the other hand, His grace is manifested, then our greatest sins wane into oblivion, after becoming insignificant due to His magnanimous forgiveness.



إِذَا وَقَعَ مِنْكَ ذَنْبٌ .. فَلَا يَكُنْ سَبَبًا لِيَأْسِكَ مِنْ حُصُولِ
الْإِسْتِقَامَةِ مَعَ رَبِّكَ، فَقَدْ يَكُونُ ذَلِكَ آخِرَ ذَنْبٍ قُدِّرَ عَلَيْكَ.

**When you commit a sin, let it not be a reason for your
despairing of attaining to righteousness before your Lord,
for that might be the last decreed for you. [148]**

When one commits some sin, as the result of human nature, one should never allow the sin to bring about the slightest change in one's determination to remain steadfast upon the religion. Do not permit it to slacken one's bond with Allāh Most High. Do not be deceived by the thought "I am unable to remain steadfast on the religion, hence my sinning; therefore I might as well give up!" Never think that steadfastness is impossible in the aftermath of committing a sin. Rather, one must hope—as the aphorism suggests—that maybe Allāh will not destine another sin for one.

With this hope, one must be very careful to not become audacious in sin. Indeed, a sin committed spontaneously due to temporary human weakness is not in conflict with steadfastness upon the religion; however, persistence in sins without constant recourse to repentance, whereby one engages in a prolonged and deliberate commission of sins, is a complete negation of steadfastness.

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مِنْ عِلَامَاتِ مَوْتِ الْقَلْبِ عَدَمُ الْحُزْنِ عَلَى مَا فَاتَكَ مِنَ
الْمُؤَافَقَاتِ، وَتَرْكُ النَّدَمِ عَلَى مَا فَعَلْتَهُ مِنْ وُجُودِ الرَّذَائِلِ.

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 that you have made. [48]

Know that just as the life of the physical body is dependent on food, the life of the spiritual heart is dependent on faith (*īmān*) and righteous deeds (*a'māl ṣāliḥa*). In the same way as the physical body would perish if deprived of nourishment, the spiritual heart dies without its own sustenance. Thus if one is unconcerned with acts of disobedience—such as the neglect of the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), fasting (*ṣawm*), or actions of disobedience committed by others—then this spiritual state is clearly indicative of the fact that one's spiritual heart is dead, and devoid of the states of faith.

Yet when the heart derives pleasure from acts of obedience, and grieves when afflicted with sin, then the indication is that the light of faith (*nūr al-īmān*) is radiating.

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لَا يَعْظُمُ الذَّنْبُ عِنْدَكَ عَظَمَةً تُصَدِّدُكَ عَنْ حُسْنِ الظَّنِّ بِاللَّهِ تَعَالَى ..
فَإِنَّ مَنْ عَرَفَ رَبَّهُ اسْتَصْغَرَ فِي جَنْبِ كَرَمِهِ ذَنْبَهُ.

Let no sin 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]

One should not hold one's sins in such a grave light that one loses hope