

A Journey to God

with

Ibn Ata's Words of Wisdom

in light of

Universal Laws

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Introduction

The Start of the Journey

There is no real distance between you and Him in order for you to journey. And the connection between you and Him is not cut such that you must mend it.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

All praise is due to God. Peace and blessings be upon the Prophet Muhammad, his family, his Companions, and whoever follows his guidance until the Last Day. We ask God Almighty to bestow on us His Mercy and His Grace, out of His Mercy and Generosity, not because of what we do or we have ever done, and not because of what we know or we have ever known; only out of His pure Mercy and Generosity. God alone is All-Knowing and we do not know. God alone is All-Powerful, and we have no power.

And God alone is the One who makes certain things happen and prevents other things from happening. We seek refuge in Him and we rely on Him alone. We ask Him to protect us against our ignorance and false illusion, to mend our flaws, to keep us on the straight path, and to guide us to what pleases Him.

We ask Him to make this journey that we are starting here a journey towards some true change in ourselves. In fact, it is impossible to change one's self toward a better state, or to ascend in the levels of conciseness and awareness without God's bounty and help: *Verily, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love: but it is God who guides him that wills to be guided; and He is fully aware of all who would let themselves be guided (Quran 28:56).*¹

¹ My translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran are based on Muhammad Asad's excellent translation, with some modifications to suit the context of this book. In some cases, I use modern

But God promised us that if we are grateful to Him, He will give us more, and if we ask Him to forgive our mistakes, He will shower upon us His forgiveness as well as His blessings, materially and spiritually. He also promised that if we pray wholeheartedly, He will answer our prayers, and if we rely on Him, we will definitely succeed. In short, everything that we dream to achieve in this journey depends upon how much we rely on Him, turn to Him, seek His help, and pray to Him. Whatever good comes our way will be His choice, and He always chooses the best of circumstances for those who rely on Him.

This book is meant to be a ‘journey’—a journey for God, with God, and to God, although He is truly close to us, much closer than we ever think. *And if My servants ask you about Me—behold, I am near* (Quran 2:186). *We are closer to the human than his neck-vein* (Quran 50:16). In Ibn Ata’s words: “There is no real distance between you and Him in order for you to journey. And the connection between you and Him is not cut such that you must mend it.” God is very near—we are the ones who are far away! God is closer to us than our neck-veins—we are the ones who are disconnected! This is why we must “journey” to Him, and learn how to come closer to Him.

Throughout our journey, we will learn manners; manners with God, not with people. We will learn to improve our character so that we are fit to be God’s servants. This is a very important side of Islam that we often forget and do not give due attention to.

Here, we are not referring to the rituals of Islam or the laws of Islam. We are concerned with the spirit and the feelings of the heart while we perform these rituals or apply these laws in our practical lives. Here, we will not learn about the rules of the lawful and forbidden, but rather about how to discover our faults, humble ourselves, and offer sincere repentance to God. We will not learn about the rules of performing ablution and prayer, but rather about how to concentrate in our prayers and be ready to receive the cleansing light of ablution. We will not learn about the ‘correct’ movements of

words in place of old English, or make substitutions that are closer to the meanings referred to in this text.

the body, but rather about the correct state of the heart; how to rely on God, how to surrender to God, how to humble ourselves before God, how to remember God, how to be content with His decrees, and how to reflect on His incredible creation. When we learn all this, we will know how to smile from our hearts and how to be happier people! *To a happy state shall indeed attain he who causes this self to grow in purity, and truly lost is he who buries it in darkness* (Quran 91:9–10).

‘Purification of the Soul’ is one of the Islamic branches of knowledge (or sciences) which some people call Sufism, and others call the science of hearts, of inner souls, of humbleness, of manners, the divinely-bestowed science, or even spirituality. In our journey to God, however, we are not concerned with names, classifications, and terminologies. We only care about the meanings, the purposes, and the essences.

However, it is valid and rational to ask: why do we need a separate ‘science’ or branch of knowledge for the purification of hearts, spirituality, or what is popularly known as Sufism?

The answer is that any science, including the religious sciences, develops based on the need for it. In the early days of Islam, there were no sciences of *tafsir* (interpretation), of *fiqh* (Islamic law), of *hadith* (prophetic traditions), of *rijal* (hadith narrators), of *usul al-fiqh* (philosophy of Islamic law), of *dawa* (Islamic call), or *ilm al-kalam* (Islamic philosophy of religion). But as times changed and people found themselves in dire need of such disciplines, scholars developed and classified such sciences for those who seek knowledge, and for those who wish to transfer their knowledge to others. Sufism is no exception.

And if you want to learn the science of *tafsir* (interpretation), for example, you must find the right experts in this field and study with them. It is a branch of knowledge with a philosophy, principles, and well-known major works written by principal scholars in the field, as with other disciplines, be they in the field of religion, the social sciences, or humanities. Sufism is no exception.

And every seeker of a science goes through different stages; from the beginner’s stage to the stage of researchers and experts. Like other branches of Islamic knowledge, Sufism, spirituality, or purification of the soul (regardless of the name it is given) takes the seeker through these stages.

Note that some Sufis deviated from Sufism itself and what it is about, and others took extreme positions that the overwhelming majority of Muslims disagree with. Again, these deviations are not unique to Sufism. Other scholars of other sciences have also abused their sciences in one way or another. But this certainly does not render the whole science, or branch of knowledge, irrelevant, immoral, or forbidden.

Thus, we should not abandon Sufism just because some Sufis deviated from its right course, or because some Sufis fail to understand some fundamental Islamic concepts or address some essential contemporary issues. Some Sufis, for example, misunderstand the concept of relying on God and distort this great Islamic concept into laziness and apathy. Other Sufis misunderstand the virtue of hope in God's Mercy and take it as a permission to sin, as if they were immune from heavenly punishment. Likewise, some Sufis misunderstand the concept of 'fear of God' and turn it into a state of hopelessness, and so on. But all these deviations should not distract us from the purpose and aims of Sufism. First and foremost, Sufism aims at purifying one's soul until it reaches a level of excellence (*ihsan*) in knowing God and worshipping Him.

Now, who is qualified to teach us such knowledge? The answer is well explained in our Islamic heritage. The scholars most qualified to teach the purification of the soul are those who have mastered both kinds of knowledge, that is, the knowledge of the apparent and the knowledge of the soul, which means the knowledge of *fiqh* (law; knowledge about the lawful and the forbidden) and the knowledge of *haqiqa* (Truth), respectively. We cannot learn about the Truth without keeping the law in mind and observing its rules and moral limits.

While many Muslims simply equate *fiqh* with *sharia* (the Islamic way of life), *fiqh* is, in fact, only one part of the *sharia*. The knowledge of the *sharia* is much broader, and indeed it includes Sufism. One's conduct with God and the purification of the soul are part and parcel of the Islamic way of life (*sharia*) revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him).

In this book, we embark on a spiritual journey to our Lord. Our teacher is a scholar who mastered the knowledge of the apparent and the knowledge of the soul. He is Ibn Ata, Master, Imam, and Shaykh

Abu al-Fadl Taj al-Din Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Abd al-Karim, Ibn Ata-Allah al-Sakandari (may God have mercy on him), a great authority in Islamic spirituality, Islamic law, hadith, Arabic language, and other branches of knowledge.

Ibn Ata's masterpiece and most famous contribution to knowledge was written in the form of *hikam* (words of wisdom), in which each *hikma* (maxim, or word of wisdom) discusses a specific topic and guides believers one step along the Path. In my view, the words of wisdom (*hikam*) are meant to be a step-by-step spiritual journey to God, in the true sense of the word, from its start to its end, along the steps that Ibn Ata mastered and prescribed. This book is a selection of thirty of these *hikam*, presented in the form of "steps" along one's journey to/with God.

The journey begins with repentance to God, cherishing hope in His Mercy, learning sincerity to Him, relying on Him, reflecting upon His creation, and searching deep into one's soul for one's flaws. The journey ends by reaching a level of awareness, humbleness, satisfaction, and excellence in order "to worship God as though you are seeing Him, and while you see Him not yet truly He sees you," as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said.

Ibn Ata-Allah (whose name means, literally, the son of God's gift) was indeed gifted with wisdom and knowledge; *God grants wisdom unto whom He wills: and whoever is granted wisdom has indeed been granted wealth abundant* (Quran 2:269). Ibn Ata was born in 647 AH/1250 ACE. He grew up, lived, and died (709 AH/1309 ACE) in Alexandria, Egypt, may God bless his soul. Ibn Ata left behind a large number of students that he taught and a fine collection of books that he wrote. His teachers, students, and contemporaries acknowledged his qualifications to issue fatwas in matters of faith according to the rules of Sufism, and in matters of practical life according to the rules of Maliki *fiqh*.

Each chapter begins with a translation/interpretation of Ibn Ata's eloquent and concise words. My humble comments start with some questions about the meaning of the *hikma* at hand. Then, I offer answers to those questions by explaining Ibn Ata's words in a way that is less concise and somewhat simpler than the high language he used. I attempt to support every new concept with evidence from

the Quran and the Sunna (Prophet Muhammad's tradition). My objective from this citation of original Islamic texts is to explain the originality and 'authenticity' of the Sufi terminology and expressions that Ibn Ata proposed. Sometimes, along the Sufi journey, we come across expressions that are, unfortunately, unfamiliar to most Muslims, such as those that refer to the "virtue of isolation," "not relying on one's good deeds," "not feeling content with oneself," or the importance of *baraka* (heavenly blessing). As I show here, Sufi expressions do, in fact, have their roots in the Quranic and prophetic language.

For example, the idea of 'isolation' is confirmed with reference to the Prophet Muhammad's *itikaf* (isolation for worship) in the mountains and in the mosque during the month of Ramadan and other months as well. The idea of 'not relying on one's good deeds' is supported by the hadith in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) says: "None amongst you can enter Paradise because of his good deeds alone . . . except with God's Mercy."² The idea of dissatisfaction with oneself is supported by the verse which reads, *But nay! I call to witness the accusing voice of man's own conscience!* (Quran 75:2). Likewise, the concept of *baraka*, or blessing, is mentioned and explained in a number Quranic verses and prophetic traditions.

I also try to elaborate on the relationship between these words of wisdom and the universal laws of God (*al-sunan al-ilahiyya*). These are the higher, consistent, and fundamental laws that God made to govern everything in our universe, such as the balance of unity, parity, and diversity in our creation and in the creation of everything, and the cyclical changes in human development and in the development of every society, trend, and phenomena. Universal laws also include other principles that govern human life in its individual and societal forms, including justice, trials, repayment, and other principles that are explained throughout the book.

The original form of this book was thirty short speeches which I delivered in Arabic during *tarawih* (night) prayers throughout the month of Ramadan 1429 AH/2008 ACE, at the Hira Mosque in

² Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

Muqattam in Cairo, Egypt. This beautiful mosque was built by the late Shaykh Abdallah Shehata of Dar al-Ulum Faculty of Cairo University, and is now faithfully maintained by his wonderful family. The lessons were originally divided over the thirty days of the month of Ramadan, and then published in a book in Arabic (*al-Suluk ma'a-Allah* [Cairo: Dar al-Hidaya, 2010]) in the form of twenty-eight chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. The present English work is a different book, though it is based on the ideas, themes, and the division of chapters of the Arabic book.³

The *Hikam* [Words of wisdom] has been commented on and explained in different forms by both classic and contemporary scholars. Of the classic commentaries, the ones made by Imams Ibn Abbad, Ahmad Zarruq, and Ibn Ajiba were the best that I came across. I also benefited greatly from the commentaries of contemporary scholars, especially our late Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, Shaykh Said Hawwa, and Shaykh Ali Jumaa.

I do not consider this humble book to be a new commentary; it is, rather, a compilation of some personal reflections on Ibn Ata's wisdom, which I pray God benefits me with and benefits others too. It is impossible to know how God will benefit others with a word you say or a book you write. All I have is hope in Him, and I know from experience that the Generous Almighty takes people who have hope in Him a long way!

As the next words of wisdom will explain, our flaws, shortcomings, and mistakes should not stop us from working, hoping, and also expecting God's infinite Grace, Mercy, and Bounty. Let us seek God's assistance and send peace and blessings upon the prophets, their wise followers, and those who followed their path to God.

Jasser Auda

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³ I would like to thank Brother Mohsen Haredy, for his help with the translation and hadith authentication of the Arabic book, which I benefited from in this English version.

First Step

Repentance and hope

If you find yourself having less hope in God when you make a mistake, then realise that you are only relying on your work, not on God's Mercy.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

When I have an intention to start or re-start a spiritual journey to God, I have to ask myself: where should I start? And what should I take with me on this journey? Should I recall the good deeds I have done and take them as my provisions in this journey? The answer given by Ibn Ata in these words of wisdom is: No! Do not rely even on your good deeds, rather start your journey to God by simply turning your heart to Him, putting your trust in Him alone, and hoping only for His Mercy and Bounty to carry you through your journey.

However, one might ask: Is not receiving God's mercy a result of good deeds? And, does God's mercy and bounty stop when I have no good deeds? The answer is no. *Now if God were to take humans immediately to task for all the evil that they do, He would not leave a single living creature upon the face of earth* (Quran 16:61). Therefore, it is not a matter of 'deserving' or 'earning' God's mercy and bounties. It is a matter of relying on God's mercy and bounties to receive them despite one's shortcomings. This is the right start for the right course.

But turning to God and hoping for His mercy must be accompanied by repentance from one's mistakes and errors. According to God's universal laws, in order to put something in a certain place, there must be room and space for this addition. Faith and light is no exception. Thus, if we want to fill our hearts with faith, light, and God's remembrance, we should first find room in our hearts that is not occupied with other sorts of objects and desires. Only then can we fill our hearts with goodness, or, according to the Sufi expression: Purity, then beauty, then light (*al-takhalli thum al-tahalli thum al-tajalli*).

Therefore, we must start this journey by repenting to God of our shortcomings. *And always, O you believers—all of you—turn unto God in repentance, so that you might attain to a happy state!* (Quran 24:31).

Repentance should be accompanied by a certain feeling, as Ibn Ata emphasises here in these words of wisdom—hope in God. But why is hope necessary for repentance? And how does this relate to one’s journey? This is what Ibn Ata explains here. He says: “If you find yourself having less hope in God when you make a mistake, then realise that you are only relying on your work, not on God’s Mercy.” This means that if you are keen to rely on God’s mercy and put all your trust in Him, make sure that you are not self-righteous! Do not think that you have achieved virtue because of your efforts and deeds. And among the signs of one’s relying on his deeds, more than on God’s mercy and bounty, is the decrease in hope when one makes a mistake. Hope in Him should always be at the same level.

Scholars count four necessary conditions for a correct repentance. First, one should feel remorse for the mistake he made. Second, one should stop making the mistake, if it is a continuing habit. Third, one should have a sincere determination not to repeat the same mistake in the future. Fourth, if the mistake relates to people’s rights, one must return to people what one owes them. A sincere repentant must meet these four conditions.

The first condition is feeling remorse for the mistake. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “Remorse is repentance.”⁴ The second condition is to refrain from committing the mistake itself; a hypocrite is one who continues the mistake while claiming repentance from it. The third condition is to have a sincere determination never to repeat the same mistake in the future. One cannot feel regret about a mistake and give it up, while also having an intention to commit the mistake again in the near or distant future.

But if it happens that—God forbid—one falls into the same error again, the only solution is to repeat the same process again, that is, renew the repentance, renew the remorse and regret, and decide not to

⁴ Reported by Ibn Hibban and Ibn Maja.

fall again. And so on. One must know that God is Most Forgiving and Most Merciful. God does not mind accepting one's (sincere) repentance again and again. On the contrary, God is pleased when His servant repents to Him, as the Prophet said.

As for the fourth condition, scholars say that if the mistake one has committed relates to people's rights, one must make amends. For example, if one unlawfully takes something, it must be returned. If an injustice is committed, it must be corrected. Scholars also mention that one must seek people's pardon if one speaks ill of them. And so on.

Ibn Ata assumes the fulfilment of these conditions, and adds that one must have a feeling of hope in the Lord. This is not a "condition" but rather an ethic (with God). *These it is who may hope for God's grace: for God is Much-Forgiving, a Dispenser of Grace* (Quran 2:218).

Sometimes, hope is lost, and one asks himself: How should I look forward to God's grace after making all these mistakes? How will God accept my repentance? This questioning itself is a mistake! A feeling that your mistakes are too great and too many for God to forgive goes against the very belief in God, the Merciful. This will cause one to lose hope in God's mercy and eventually lead to despair and hopelessness. *And who—other than those who have utterly lost their way—could ever abandon the hope of their Sustainer's grace?* (Quran 15:56).

One who loses hope is not really relying on God. Rather, one is relying on his weak self, limited mind, and humble actions. Of course, this does not mean that he should stop working and say that he has hope. This is also wrong. Relying on God is a feeling in the heart while the body is in action.

Here, Ibn Ata says that, regardless of how grave one's mistakes, they should not affect one's hope in God's mercy. If one repents sincerely to God, God surely will accept his repentance. The Prophet is reported to have said: "A person who has repented of a sin sincerely is exactly like the person who has never sinned at all."⁵ And he said: "God says: O son of Adam, as long as you call upon Me and

⁵ Reported by Ibn Maja.

ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind! O son of Adam, were you to come to Me with sins nearly as great as the earth, I would forgive you, and I shall not mind.”⁶

Hope should not be affected by the gravity of one’s mistakes. Rather, one should make a sincere intention to repent to God and simply expect His mercy. The Prophet also said: “God says: I am as My servant expects Me to be! So, let him think of Me as he wishes.”⁷

Here Ibn Ata says, if you find yourself having less hope in God when you make a mistake, then realise that you are only relying on your work, not on God’s mercy. And this meaning is similar to the meaning of the hadith in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) says: “None amongst you can enter Paradise because of his deeds alone.” The Companions asked: “God’s Messenger, not even you?” The Prophet said: “Not even myself, unless God bestows His forgiveness and mercy on me.”⁸

In this hadith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) says: “There is none whose deeds alone would entitle him to enter Paradise.” Does this mean that we lose hope in God’s mercy? Of course not. What is meant is that we must not to rely on our deeds, but place our trust in God’s mercy. This is the same message that Ibn Ata conveyed in his words of wisdom.

But so much hope should not turn into a feeling of immunity, that is, to feel immune and saved from God’s punishment, regardless of what you do. *And they say, “The fire will most certainly not touch us for more than a limited number of days”* (Quran 2:80). This verse was revealed regarding some of the previous nations, those who believed that they are God’s chosen people, regardless of their actions and regardless of what they do in this life. Nowadays, some Muslims think that as long as they are Muslims, they can do whatever they want and they will not be harmed. God says: *But none feels secure from God’s deep devising save people who are lost* (Quran 7:99).

⁶ Reported by al-Tirmidhi.

⁷ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

⁸ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

Hope should not become a false state of immunity or a guarantee that God will bestow His mercy regardless of what one does. The only guarantee is one's actual admission to Paradise. Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (may God be pleased with him) said: "I would not feel safe from God's deep devising even if one of my feet was in Paradise and the other is still outside."

Thus, we should strike a balance between hope and awe. Balance is a universal law that we must struggle to find in everything. Balance in repentance is to repent sincerely to God, not only out of hope in His mercy but also out of fear of His repayment.

Some disbelievers have an illusion of hopelessness. They might want to turn to their Lord, but they think that He will never forgive the evil they did. Therefore, they continue in their wrong ways. God says: *Your Sustainer has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy—so that if any of you does an evil deed out of ignorance, and thereafter repents and lives righteously, God shall be Much-Forgiving, a Dispenser of Grace. And thus clearly do We spell out Our messages so that the path of those who are lost in sin might be distinct [from that of the righteous who repent] (Quran 6:54–55).*

The sinner is the one who rejects this divine offer of repentance. Here we must strike a balance between hope and awe.

Thus, the first step on this path is to affirm your hope in God's mercy and simply turn your heart to Him. This is the first stop in the long, or short journey.

Second Step

The dominance of the universal laws of God

A human will, however strong it is, can never pierce through the veils of destiny.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

We began our spiritual journey to God with words of wisdom that guide us to have infinite hope in God's mercy; we should never doubt our hope in God because of past mistakes. God is Merciful and forgives any mistake as long as there is sincere repentance.

Sometimes, when one begins a new journey or a new resolution, one is full of energy, aspiration, and enthusiasm. Thus, he tries to change himself, his family, society, country, and the whole world overnight! People sometimes forget what Ibn Ata called "the veils of destiny." Ibn Ata says, "A human will, however strong it is, can never pierce through the veils of destiny." What does this mean?

It means that despite our strong will and determination to do something, we cannot pierce through God's destinies. These destinies are universal laws (*sunan*) that are consistent and prevailing. God says: *No change will you ever find in God's laws (sunna); yea, no deviation will you ever find in God's laws!* (Quran 35:44). This is how the universe is created naturally. *Behold, everything have We created in due measure* (Quran 54:49).

Among these universal laws is God's creation of life according to certain conditions that lead to certain results. No human being, Muslim or non-Muslim, can ever pierce through the veils of destiny and achieve specific outcomes without following the right means, reasons, steps, circumstances, and laws (*sunan*).

For instance, God says: *Do humans think that on their saying, "We have attained faith," they will be left to themselves, and will not be put to a test?* (Quran 29:2). This is the law of trials, or testing

people with hardship in this life. If anyone claims that they believe in God and have attained faith, God will test them with some of this world's trials. No one can avoid this test however strong their will or determination. This is a universal law.

Another example is the universal laws of change. One of these laws is the need for any process of change to progress in due time and graduation. Time has been created by God for people such that everyone recognises its nature and importance according to his own knowledge. Only God is not bound by time. Time simply does not apply to God. It is only a human reality, and God decreed that goals should take time to be achieved. We cannot change the world or even change ourselves in a moment. This will never happen. You may try to learn the Quran by heart as fast as you can. But you should not memorise the Quran in a week or a month. And if you commit it to memory in a month, you will forget it all in a month or even less. We must let things take their necessary time and surrender to God's laws and destiny. In fact, people who try to make abrupt changes in themselves or the world around them often fail and most likely despair!

Muslim jurists state the following maxim: "A person who hastens something before its due time will be punished by being deprived of it." In other words, if one ignores the fact that time is needed for any significant change in this world, one not only delays the desired change, but will most likely lose it forever.

Among the veils of destiny that every Muslim must also note is what scholars call the "duty of the time" (*wajib al-waqt*). Throughout one's life, there are different stages that carry with them different duties and responsibilities. For example, at one stage, you must work hard to earn money to get married. This might take much time and effort for a while. At another stage, you might have to look after young children or elderly parents, and take care of their affairs. At a later stage of life, when children are older and more independent, you may have financial security, but will have to work hard to achieve a certain higher goal, or fulfil your duties in a public service office, for example. At a different stage, the duty of the time might involve travel in pursuit of knowledge, or perhaps, God forbid, taking a long break for health reasons. In all of the above cases you cannot pierce through the

veils of destiny. When you are sick, you cannot behave as you did when you were healthy, and when you are seventy, you cannot behave as you did when you were forty!

This is an important step on the path to God: always pay attention to the duty of your time, as much as you understand it. Believe in God's wisdom in everything He gives or takes away, and surrender to the laws of the universe and the veils of destiny.

It is also important on the path to God, after completing a duty or turning a new page, to turn to the Lord in worship and devotion. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was addressed in the Quran by the following: *Hence, when you are freed [from hardship], remain steadfast, and turn all your attention to your Lord in devotion and love* (Quran 94:7–8).

And even when we turn to God in devotion, we must still do this step by step. The Prophet is reported to have said “Surely this religion is firm, so walk through it step by step.”⁹ This means that even embracing religion in one's daily life should be undertaken gradually. You cannot learn all the ideals and rules or practice them in one day. The Prophet continued, saying “This is because the traveller who is too harsh on his riding animal will not reach his destination, and the riding animal will die.” However strong your determination and aspiration is, your body is like that riding animal, and you need to apply the same law to it.

The previous words of wisdom taught us to strike a balance between awe and hope, and these words of wisdom also teach us to strike a balance between our will and divine destiny, or between the steps we aspire to advance by on God's path, and the “veils of destiny,” as the Shaykh put it. These two rules of balance will allow us to advance to the next step on our journey.

⁹ Reported by al-Bayhaqi.

Third Step

Relying on God

Save yourself from worrying. Someone else already took care of your affairs for you.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Relying on God (*tawakkul*) is an important Islamic concept that is mentioned many times in the Quran, but often misunderstood in the popular Sufi conception. It is a misunderstanding that leads to deviation from the true religion of God, and can cause failure in both religious and worldly affairs. This happens when relying on God (*tawakkul*) is mixed with apathy (*tawaakul*). In the name of relying on God, many people who claimed to be Sufis—during some dark periods of history—chose a lifestyle of laziness, begging, and uselessness (traditionally called *bitala* in Arabic). The spread of this idea amongst the religious people left Muslims' public affairs to be run by the least qualified and the least pious.

So, how do we practice reliance on God (*tawakkul*) properly? Ibn Ata advises: “Save yourself from worrying (*tadbir*). Someone else already took care of your affairs for you.” What is meant by *tadbir* here?

Tadbir in Arabic means considering the results of actions. Thus, *tadbir* is closely connected with outcomes. Ibn Ata says that it is with regard to outcomes that we should practice reliance on God and trust in Him. God says: *Then, when you have decided upon a course of action, place your trust in God: for, verily, God loves those who place their trust in Him* (Quran 3:159); *In God, then, let the believers place their trust!* (Quran 3:160), *they answered, “God is enough for us; and how excellent a guardian is He!”* (Quran 3:173).

Concerning oneself with working on the means is desirable, but worrying is being concerned about the ends and outcomes, which are up to God in any case! A believer strives to achieve goals and

relies on God. It is God who is in control of everything. *And who is it that is in control of all that exists?* (Quran 10:31). One must remind himself of this clear question raised in the Quran.

And if God is in charge, then we have to follow the means and leave the outcomes to Him. The Prophet (peace be upon him) gave us a perfect example to teach us the meaning of relying on God. He said: “If you had all relied on God as you should rely on Him, then He would have provided for you as He provides for the birds, who wake up hungry in the morning and return with full stomachs at dusk.”

We are like these birds. And the birds never stand on one branch of a tree waiting for grain to come! They move continuously from one branch to another until they find the grain. The bird’s work is to do its best to find the grain; but providing the bird with the grain is God’s work.

Therefore, a believer should follow the means and leave the outcomes to God. Some people, however, do not follow any means. They stay in the mosque all the time, and beg people for their food and clothes. They argue that *tadbir* is not their job. This situation did happen at the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). It is reported that a man used to stay at the mosque all the time, arguing that he was devoting himself to worship God. The Prophet asked about who supports him. The Prophet was told that the man’s brother supports him. The Prophet commented: “His brother is better than him.” Umar b. al-Khattab advised some people, who lived at the mosque and claimed to be “relying on God,” by his famous words: “The sky does not rain gold or silver.”

Relying on God is also desirable when success is not attained even after following every necessary means. In this case, one might say: “O God, I have done my best, what should I do? I can only put my trust in You.” One must understand that sometimes God withholds success or takes away the means from people so they return to Him and rely on Him. This is a valuable God-given gift.

Finally, relying on God is not inconsistent with many activities today—planning, carrying out feasibility studies, analysing the market, and so forth. All of this is part of relying on God because, by planning, organising, and studying, we are following the means of success. If you have a commercial project, for example, you have to make a feasibility study of the market, and rely on God. Then, if

you lose, it is God's decree, and if you win, it is also God's decree. In both cases, you do not have to worry about the outcomes now.

Even in religious issues, like calling people to belief or seeking excellence in worship, we can only do our best and leave the rest to God. He says: *It is not for you [O Prophet] to make people follow the right path, since it is God alone who guides whom He wills* (Quran 2:272), and *Verily, you cannot guide aright everyone whom you love: but it is God who guides those who are willing to be guided; and He is fully aware of the truly guided ones* (Quran 28:56).

Ibn Ata says: "Save yourself from worrying. Someone else already took care of your affairs for you." By "someone else," he meant the Almighty One who provides the means and decides the outcomes.

Fourth Step

Sincerity to God

Actions are like statues that only come to life with the spirit of sincerity.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Sincerity to God is more fundamental than reliance on God, since it has to do with a deeper level of faith in Him. Yet, it was important to affirm our reliance on God and hope in His mercy before discussing sincerity. This is because pure sincerity to God is subtle and difficult to achieve without first having hope in God's grace and strong reliance on Him.

“Sincerity is one of God's ‘secrets’ that He plants in the heart of whomsoever He loves,” the Prophet Muhammad said. And sincerity to God is essential for our journey. In Ibn Ata's words: “Actions are like statues that only come to life with the spirit of sincerity.” If we imagine a simile between an action and a human body, then the action devoid of sincerity is like a body without a soul; a dead body.

What is sincerity? It means that your intention (Arabic: *niyya*, *maqsid*) is honest and true to God. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Actions are according to intentions and every man shall have that which he intended. Thus, he whose migration is for God and His messenger, his migration is for God and His messenger, and he whose migration is to achieve some worldly benefit or to take a woman in marriage, his migration is for that for which he migrated.”¹⁰

The hadith talks about two examples of migration (both with the Prophet, from Mecca to Medina). Some people migrated only to do business or to get married; they will be rewarded only for their intentions. However, the Companions who migrated purely for the sake of God and to support His

¹⁰ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

messenger, their reward is also according to their intention. In fact, God told us specifically their reward in the Quran: *And as for the first and foremost of those who have migrated [to Medina] and of those who have supported them, as well as those who follow them in [the way of] righteousness—God is well-pleased with them, and well-pleased are they with Him. And for them has He readied gardens through which running waters flow, therein to abide beyond the count of time: this is the triumph supreme!* (Quran 9:100).

Having a pure intention is very important: without this intention, worship becomes a show, with the intention to please people, not to please God. Worship with an intention to please people is an act of polytheism and hypocrisy, God forbid. In fact, God describes the hypocrites in the Quran as follows: *Behold, the hypocrites seek to deceive God—while it is He who causes them to be deceived by themselves. And when they rise to pray, they rise reluctantly, only to be seen and praised by people, remembering God but seldom* (Quran 4:142). And amongst those who deserve blame and punishment in the hereafter, God mentions *those who want only to be seen and praised* (Quran 107:6–7).

Every action should be done with a pure intention to please God Almighty. We must ask ourselves, why are we doing this, giving this charity, going on *hajj* (pilgrimage), helping this person, offering this prayer, reading this book? And so on.

And by sincerity, we can turn our daily habits into rewarded acts of worship. Eating, drinking, going to work, getting married, travelling, buying, selling, and all other actions and habits can be acts of worship for which we will be rewarded.

For example, one may eat in order not to feel hungry. But one can also eat and have a sincere intention to be able to worship God. This intention makes eating itself a rewarded act of worship. One may dress well in order to look good. But one can also have the additional intention to thank God, show modesty, please others, and so on. We may work only for the salary, but we can also work to give charity, to perform *hajj*, to support our families, and so on.

All of these are intentions that turn our habits into acts of worship, if they are sincere and true, and give us momentum in our spiritual journey to God. Some people journey to God only through regular

prayers at their fixed times, through *zakah* (charity) when it is due, and through other specified acts of worship. They could, however, journey much faster if they learn how to transform daily habits into additional acts of worship.

One of the Sufi imams heard someone knocking on his door while he was with some students. Before opening the door, the imam mentioned to his students several sincere intentions that he recalled: if he opens the door and finds a poor man, he will give him charity; if he finds a person who needs help, he will help him; if he finds a lost person, he will show him the way; if he finds a little child, he will be kind to him; if he finds an old man, he will show him respect; if he finds a student of knowledge, he will teach him, and so on. The simplest act of opening that door became—by the man’s pure intention—a number of acts of worship!

Ibn Ata says: “Actions are like statues that only come to life with the spirit of sincerity.” Let us always ask God to grant us sincerity, to help us turn our habits into sincere acts of worship, and devote our lives to Him alone. Say: *“Behold, my prayer, and my acts of worship, and my living and my dying are for God alone, the Lord of all the worlds. In whose divinity none has a share: for thus have I been bidden—and I shall always be foremost among those who surrender themselves unto Him”* (Quran 6:162, 163).

Fifth Step

Reflection

Bury yourself in the land of anonymity. A seed that is never buried underground will never produce. There is nothing more beneficial to the heart than isolation that allows it to enter a state of reflection.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

The next step in our journey is to develop a deeper understanding and a stronger heart, to feel all the meanings we have discussed so far: repentance, awe, hope, reliance on God, and sincerity. The way we can achieve this is, as Ibn Ata suggests, through reflection.

Reflection is a marvellous form of worship that advances us on our path to God and helps us realise our spirituality. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Reflection for one hour is better than praying for sixty years.” Even though this hadith is “weak” in terms of authenticity, its meaning is correct. This is because a person who takes the time to reflect on God and/or His creation for one hour is actually worshipping God through deep knowledge, with sincere feeling, and spiritual light.

Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are indeed messages for those who are endowed with insight. They are the ones who remember God when they stand, and when they sit, and when they lie down to sleep, and thus reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: O our Sustainer! You have not created this without meaning and purpose. Limitless are You in Your glory! (Quran 3:190–191).

Those who are endowed with insight reflect on the creation of the heavens and earth and the alternation of day and night. Many people possess abundant information about the universe in their minds, but lack feeling in their hearts. But those who truly reflect on the universe keep in their minds the Creator of the universe. They think about the heavens and the earth in terms of the Greatness of

the Maker of the heavens and the earth. This reflection eventually leads people to say: “You have not created this without meaning and purpose.”

Reflection also creates a feeling of awe of God. *Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, whereby We bring forth fruits of many hues—just as in the mountains there are streaks of white and red of various shades, as well as others raven-black—and as there are in men, and in crawling beasts, and in cattle, too, many hues? Only people of knowledge stand truly in awe of God: for they alone comprehend that* (Quran 35:28).

In these words of wisdom, Ibn Ata points out something that helps in the process of reflection—this is to maintain anonymity and isolation. Anonymity and isolation are also Sufi concepts that many people misunderstand and practice in a way that goes against the true objectives and spirit of Islam.

The Arabic word used for anonymity here is *khumul*, which could also mean laziness. Ibn Ata is referring to a state of obscurity from fame. This state is achieved when one isolates himself from people for a limited period, not indefinitely! Monastic isolation, in the sense of separating oneself from the world out of dedication to God, is against the teachings of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad made it clear that, “there is no monasticism in Islam,” and he said: “A believer who interacts with people and is patient when they harm him is better than a Muslim who does not mingle with people and does not have to be patient when they harm him.”¹¹ Thus, a normal believer interacts with people, works, marries, visits relatives and neighbours, enjoins good and forbids evil, befriends people, and so on. However, occasionally, he keeps himself in a temporary isolation, for the sake of reflection.

Is Ibn Ata’s call for “isolation” Islamic? Is there evidence in the prophetic tradition to support it? Or is it an innovation in the true faith?

¹¹ Reported by al-Bayhaqi.

There are clear lessons and evidences of isolation, in addition to the Prophet's periods of worship in the cave of Hira before and after the revelation, in the Prophet's retreat in the mosque (*itikaf*) to worship God during the month of Ramadan and during other months.

The Companions (may God be pleased with them) reported that the Prophet used to perform *itikaf* every year in the month of Ramadan for ten days, and in the year of his death, he stayed in the mosque in Ramadan for twenty days.

Aisha (may God be pleased with her) reported that the Prophet used to perform *itikaf* in the last ten days of Ramadan until he died, then his wives continued to do *itikaf* after he died. She also reported that the Prophet once performed *itikaf* for twenty days during the month of Shawwal.

Ibn Ata makes a connection here between this prophetic tradition of *itikaf* and a divine universal law of creation. Every living creature; plants, animals, birds, or even humans, goes through a period in which it is isolated in darkness, before it starts to grow and produce. Seeds in the ground and embryos in eggs or wombs must grow, initially, in isolation, away from external factors.

A seed planted in the darkness of the earth goes through a period of nurturing and watering until it finally starts to form roots and a stem. Only then is it time for the plant to break through the soil and come out to the surface. Likewise, a foetus grows in the darkness of the mother's womb until its bones, organs, and nerves are formed, then it comes to life when it is ready to live in the outside environment.

Similarly, a heart/mind needs a retreat in a mosque or a place that is isolated from people, to reach a state of enlightenment. When the heart reaches this state, it can travel from the universe to its Maker, from the creatures to their Creator, and from the realm of signs, rules and rituals to the world of meanings, wisdom, and higher purposes. This temporary isolation takes the heart back to the purity of faith and a true connection with God! Otherwise, faith remains like a seed that was never buried underground, and will never produce, as Ibn Ata puts it. This is a universal law that no one can change or ignore.

Isolation for the sake of reflection has a number of other benefits. One benefit is that it helps in avoiding sins, such as gossip and backbiting. Another benefit is that it trains the servant to guard his tongue against its destructive vices. *A human is, above all else, always given to argument* (Quran 18:54). Isolation is also training to clear one's intentions from considering people and what they say. Though showing off may find its way to one's heart, even when alone. Ibn Ata says elsewhere: "Perhaps showing off has entered upon you, even when people do not see you." This is the case when one occupies himself with how people think about him, even when alone.

Sometimes we forget the work of the heart and focus on the work of the organs. This hardens the heart and leads to forgetfulness, and puts obstacles and difficulties in the course of one's journey to God. However, a reflective retreat, which the Shaykh advises us about here, makes the heart shine. "There is nothing more beneficial to the heart than isolation that allows it to enter a state of reflection."

Sixth Step

Clearing before shining

How can the mirror of the heart shine if material images cover it? How can the heart journey to God if it is chained by its desires? How can the heart ever hope to enter the divine presence if it has not purified itself from its forgetfulness?

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Reflection causes the light of faith to shine in the heart of the believer. However, the heart is like a mirror, Ibn Ata explains, and it has to be “pure” before it shines. He says: “There is nothing more beneficial to the heart than isolation that allows it to enter a state of reflection. How can the mirror of the heart shine if material images cover it? How can the heart journey to God if it is chained by its desires? How can the heart ever hope to enter the divine presence if it has not purified itself from its forgetfulness?” In other words, before beautifying the heart with the light of virtues, it must be purified from certain flaws. Here Ibn Ata mentions three such flaws: material images, desires, and forgetfulness.

Ibn Ata asks, how can the mirror of the heart shine if material images cover it? Sufis have an expression for anything other than God, which is *al-aghyar* (Arabic: the others). When the “others,” such as material things, earthly objects, or even people, are imprinted on the heart, they act like pictures that are imprinted on a mirror. This is a wonderful simile that illustrates that it is impossible for a heart full of “others” to shine with light while it is in that state.

Certainly, this does not mean that we should ignore the material world, family, wealth, career, and so on. The question is, what is in the depth of the heart that receives the most attention and the most concern? Is it a pure heart that shines with light? *God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is, as it were, that of a niche containing a lamp; the lamp is in glass, the glass shining like a radiant star: lit from a blessed tree—an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the*

west, the oil whereof is so bright that it would well-nigh give light even though fire had not touched it: light upon light! God guides unto His light him whom He wills to be guided; and God propounds parables unto men, since God has full knowledge of all things. In the houses of worship which God has allowed to be raised... (Quran 24:35–6). Therefore, it is in God’s house and places of worship that isolation and reflection can produce the divine Light in the believer’s heart. And light, by nature, will eliminate darkness.

The second flaw is what Ibn Ata called “desires.” Ibn Ata asks, “How can the heart journey to God if it is chained by its desires?” Again, this does not mean that every desire is evil! Islam is not against desires and, in fact, did not prohibit them; Islam only regulates desires. God did not create desires in us, and then prohibit our expressing them completely. It is a universal law that instincts and natural human desires cannot be totally suppressed. In contrast to other belief systems, Islam does not prohibit natural desires or consider their denial a virtue. What is prohibited is the expression of specific desires under certain circumstances.

Thus, God did not prohibit anything that He made a characteristic of our nature, such as eating, quenching our thirst, sex, speaking, laughing, singing, and listening to music, and so on. However, Islam regulates these activities in a way that is moral, that is, eating should not be excessive, drinking alcohol is forbidden, speaking should be truthful and should not cause harm, sex should be within marriage, and so on.

But when it comes to isolation, meditation and reflection should not be mixed with desire, even lawful ones. God says: *do not lie with them skin to skin when you are abiding in meditation in houses of worship. These are the bounds set by God: do not, then, offend against them* (Quran 2:187). This is one of the rulings of *itikaf* (retreat in a mosque), and this verse is also evidence in Islamic law for the legality of *itikaf*. As for how the Prophet (peace be upon him) applied this tradition (*sunna*), it is reported that he used to do *itikaf* in the last ten days of Ramadan. In the year in which he died, he retreated for twenty days. It is reported that he performed *itikaf* in months other than Ramadan.

Therefore, *itikaf* is not only confined to Ramadan and it can be observed in other months, as part of the prophetic tradition.

In general, from the Islamic viewpoint the light of the heart does not contradict with desire. They only contradict each other when desire distracts or covers the heart so that it cannot journey to God. God says: *And God wants to turn unto you in His mercy, whereas those who follow only their own lusts want you to drift far away from the right path* (Quran 4:27).

The third flaw that Ibn Ata points to is forgetfulness. Ibn Ata asks, “How can the heart ever hope to enter the divine presence if it has not purified itself from its forgetfulness?” God’s presence is what is expressed in the Quran in terms of God being “with” people, even though He is never absent, Glory be to Him. God says: *Behold, God is with those who believe!* (Quran 8:19), *seeing that God is with you, you are bound to rise high in the end; and never will He let your good deeds go to waste* (Quran 47:35), *and know that God is with those who are conscious of Him* (Quran 9:36), *and be patient in adversity: for, verily, God is with those who are patient in adversity* (Quran 8:46), *for, verily, God is with those who are conscious of Him and are doers of good withal!* (Quran 16:128). All those people; believers, doers of good deeds, those who are conscious of Him, the patient ones—they are all with God and in God’s presence.

The question, then, is what prevents people from feeling or attaining God’s presence? Ibn Ata says that forgetfulness and neglect of the remembrance of God is something we need to seek God’s forgiveness from. Remembrance of God is what purifies the heart.

Every Muslim should devote part of his time to the remembrance of God. Do not say that you do not have time to remember God! This is unacceptable, because you can remember God in any circumstance and condition. And in terms of remembering Him in isolation, this is a matter of half an hour or an hour that can benefit the heart and make a difference. Therefore, Ibn Ata says in the next words of wisdom: “Postponing good deeds until you have free time is an indication of an immature soul.”

We ask the Light of heavens and earth—as the Prophet asked Him—to grant us light “above us, below us, ahead of us, to the right, to the left, and in our hearts, and to make us sources of light.”

Seventh Step

Seizing time

Postponing good deeds until you have free time is an indication of an immature soul.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Sometimes we postpone the good that we have the intention to do and say: I will do that tomorrow, next week, next month, or next Ramadan. I will do that when I get married, when I get a promotion, when the children grow older, or when the weather gets better! Ibn Ata describes this attitude as an indication of an “immature soul.”

In fact, doing good deeds is not a matter of having time. It is a matter of priorities. One leaves home every morning for a specific number of hours, and achieves a certain number of tasks every day.

People normally do what is most important first, then what is less important, and so on. *God does not burden any human being with more than they have the ability to do* (Quran 2:286).

In Islamic law, if you have five minutes before the end of the allowed prayer period, and you have a number of things to do including your prayers, then it is an obligation to perform your prayers first. However, if there is serious harm that will happen because of you tending to your prayers (for example, a young child who will fall down the stairs or a blind person who needs help crossing the street), the obligation becomes to avoid that harm first, and then perform the prayer. In Islamic law this is called *fiqh al-awlawiyyat*, or the knowledge of priorities. We will address this topic in detail later, God willing.

The consideration of priorities, however, should not be an excuse to always postpone good work in the way of God. Procrastination has been mentioned in a hadith in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) says: “Most of the pain of the people of hell will be because of procrastination.” Even though this particular hadith has not been proven “authentic,” its meaning is indeed authentic. God says: As

for those who will not believe in the life to come, they go on lying to themselves until, when death approaches any of them, he prays: "O my Sustainer! Let me return, let me return to life, so that I might act righteously in whatever I have neglected to do!" Nay (Quran 23:99–100). Procrastination is unacceptable and is eventually regrettable. Every believer should seize time and make the best out of the time he has in this life.

And there is enough time to do almost everything one wishes to do. God will bless our time and work if we seize time and organise it. Time management is not only important for organising worldly affairs, but also for managing affairs with God. If you are in the habit of reciting a portion of the Quran or some *dhikr* (remembrance of God) every morning, and you have to leave early to work one day, seize the time while riding in the car, or while on the bus, or train, to recite the Quran, listen to it, or to simply reflect and mention God. I know of a number of brothers and sisters who memorised the whole Quran during their commutes on buses and trains. An average of one and a half hours every day allows you to memorise the whole Quran in a matter of two years!

People in developed countries usually read books or newspapers while on buses or trains. I lived five years in London and I remember how quiet London trains usually were. Even when they were crowded, they were very quiet because almost everyone was either reading, writing, or thinking, even if they were standing in the train! Believers should make the best use of their time for advancing their spiritual journey.

A believer should set his priorities straight and start with what is most important. According to the system of priorities in Islamic law, the rights of other people have higher priority than what scholars called "God's rights." This means that taking care of one's responsibilities towards other people should take precedence over pure acts of worship. However, this does not mean that we can neglect "God's rights." We should struggle to seize the time and strike a balance between the two kinds of rights.

Eighth Step

Patience with tests

Do not be surprised when difficulties happen in this worldly abode. This is life's nature

In the name of God, the Lord of Giver, the Giver of Mercy

If the servant of God repents to Him, relies on Him, purifies his intention to Him, reflects on Him, and seizes time, the light of faith will shine in his heart and his journey will draw him closer to God. As Ibn Ata said, "there is no real distance between you and Him in order for you to journey. And the connection between you and Him is not cut such that you must mend it."

The Prophet Muhammad mentioned that God said: "My servant continues to draw near to Me with additional work until I love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks. If he asks me, I will give him, and if he seeks my refuge, I will grant it to him."¹² "And if he draws near to Me a hand's span, I draw near to him an arm's length. And if he draws near to Me an arm's length, I draw near to him a fathom's length. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed."¹³

However, it is one of God's consistent and universal laws that when God loves someone, He will test him with trials in this world. God says: *Do people think that on their mere claiming, "We have attained to faith," they will be left to themselves, and will not be put to a test?* (Quran 29:2). A claim of belief has to be tested. God says: *And most certainly We shall try you all, so that We might mark*

¹² Reported by al-Bukhari.

¹³ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

out those of you who strive hard in Our cause and are patient in adversity: for We shall put to a test the truth of all your assertions (Quran 47:31).

Trials vary but the response should be the same; patience and piety. *And most certainly shall We try you by means of danger, and hunger, and loss of worldly goods, of lives and of labour's fruits. But give glad tidings unto those who are patient in adversity (Quran 2:155). You shall most certainly be tried in your possessions and in your persons; and indeed you shall hear many hurtful things from those to whom revelation was granted before your time, as well as from those who have come to ascribe divinity to other beings beside God. But if you remain patient in adversity and pious—this, behold, is something to set one's heart upon (Quran 3:186).*

God announces that this worldly life is worth very little. So, if He deprives a person of this worldly life or part of it and guides him to repentance and bestows on him His mercy and Paradise instead, then this is, in fact, a great gift! Therefore, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The most severely tested people are the prophets, then the next best, then the next best. A man will be tested in accordance with his level of commitment to God.”¹⁴

For this reason, if life is full of difficulties and challenges, one should not be surprised or ask why. It is as if Ibn Ata is asking us: What is the name of this world? The answer in Arabic is *al-dunya*, which literally means the lower life. Therefore, it is not surprising that difficult conditions, unpleasant events, and fatal consequences reveal themselves, because these things are derived from the very character and nature of this lower worldly life.

Accepting the nature of this worldly life helps the servant acquire a basic virtue and take a very important stop in his journey to God: patience with tests. Patience is a characteristic that delivers the servant into God's presence, as mentioned before: *God is with those who are patient in adversity (Quran 2:153)*. And if we are in God's presence, then we need not worry.

¹⁴ Reported by Ibn Hibban.

Patience is of three types, namely, (1) patience in doing good, (2) patience in avoiding evil, and (3) patience with tests. Patience in doing good deeds means that the believer should be active continuously, without placing hardship on himself. God says: *God has laid no hardship on you in anything that pertains to religion* (Quran 22:78). The Prophet saw an old man walking, supported by his two sons, and asked about him. The people informed him that he had vowed to travel on foot to the Kaaba. The Prophet said: “God is not in need of this old man’s torturing himself,” and ordered him to get a ride to the Kaaba.¹⁵ It is not “patience” to torture oneself or cause oneself harm.

As for patience in avoiding evil, it means that a believer should stay away from committing what God has forbidden. An example of this can be seen in the Quran, in the story of the Prophet Yusuf/Joseph and one of the tests he was put to. *And it so happened that she in whose house he was living conceived a passion for him and sought to make him yield himself unto her; and she bolted the doors and said, “Come you unto me!” Joseph answered: “May God preserve me!”* (Quran 12:23).

There is a great reward for this type of patience in resisting physical desires. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said that one of the seven persons whom God will give shade to on the Day when there would be no shade but that from Him is “a man whom a beautiful woman of high rank seduces for adultery, but he rejects by saying: I fear God.”¹⁶

And patience with God’s tests comes at different levels, all of which bear the meaning of refraining from something. The most basic level of patience with God’s tests is to refrain from committing evil acts. Then, a higher level is to refrain from complaining by your tongue. Finally, the highest level of patience is to refrain even from complaining in your heart.

Refraining from committing sins is a condition for purifying one’s heart. God says about the hypocrites: *Indeed, We tested them through suffering, but they did surrender to their Sustainer; and*

¹⁵ Reported by al-Nasai.

¹⁶ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

they will never humble themselves (Quran 23:76). When a person faces some problems, then he is at a crossroads; either to repent and surrender to God, or to fall into sin, which means failing the test.

At a higher level, patience with God's tests requires one to refrain from even complaining about the test. This is called "beautiful patience," as God tells us about the story of Prophet Jacob (peace be upon him), when he said: *I will only show beautiful patience* (Quran 12:18), and *it is only to God that I complain of my deep grief and my sorrow* (Quran 12:86). The Prophet Jacob (peace be upon him) complained only to his Lord and refused to complain to anyone else.

Being patient with God's decree at the level of the heart is the best type of patience. The believer attains this degree when he not only refrains from speaking about the difficulty, but also refrains from agonizing about it in his heart. The soul is always at peace, even at the peak of crisis. The Prophet said: "Genuine patience is at the first stroke of a calamity."¹⁷

If the believer is patient in the face of tests, he will advance in the way of God. *Consider the flight of time! Verily, a human is bound to lose himself, unless he be of those who attain to faith, and do good works, and enjoin upon one another the keeping to truth, and enjoin upon one another patience in adversity* (Quran 103:1–3). And in any case, adversity does not last forever. *And, behold, with every hardship comes ease: verily, with every hardship comes ease!* (Quran 94:4–5).

¹⁷ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

Ninth Step

Perfecting the beginnings

A sign of success in the end comes from relating [a matter] to God in the beginning. If there is no sunrise in the beginning, there is no sunrise in the end.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

A servant journeying to God, who is passing through difficult tests and heading to horizons of peace and tranquillity always thinks of new good deeds that advance him along his journey. These words of wisdom teach us another universal law: Perfecting the basis and the start of any new project almost guarantees the desired outcomes in the end. In Ibn Ata's words, if there is a sunrise in the beginning, surely there will be a sunrise in the end. The question is, how can I make the sun rise and shine at the beginning? The answer, according to Ibn Ata, is by relating it to God. But, how could one "relate it to God" in the beginning of an act?

The Prophet Muhammad taught humanity something unique: how to start every daily action with a way of mentioning God that suits that action. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Every action that does not begin by invoking the praise of God is not blessed."¹⁸ Therefore, start every action in the name of God. When giving a speech, start it by sending peace and blessings upon the Prophet and praising God Almighty. When starting an act of worship, start with a remembrance of pure intention. We are not required to begin the prayer by mentioning the intention to pray, but it is the Prophet's tradition to start the prayer with this supplication: "I turn my face in complete devotion to the One, the Originator of the heavens and the earth and I am not of the disbelievers."

And when embarking on significant tasks, pray two *rakat* (units of prayer) of *istikhara* (praying for the best course of action). All of these are ways of referring to God in the beginnings. *Istikhara* is a

¹⁸ Reported by al-Bayhaqi.

form of supplication to recite when you have a choice between two actions. The Prophet Muhammad taught us the following supplication:

O God, I seek Your help in finding the best course of action in this matter by invoking Your knowledge; I ask You to empower me, and I beseech Your favour. You alone have absolute power, while I have no power. You alone know everything, while I do not. You are the One who knows the hidden mysteries. O God, if You know this thing I am embarking on [here mention your case] is good for me in my faith, worldly life, and my ultimate destiny, then facilitate it for me, and then bless me in my action. If You know this thing is detrimental for me in my faith, worldly life, and ultimate destiny, turn it away from me, and turn me away from it, and decree what is good for me, wherever it may be, and make me content with it.

The purpose of this supplication is to show that we wholeheartedly surrender to God and rely on Him alone. Seeking God's help is a kind of "referring to God in the beginnings," as Ibn Ata advised us. Therefore, it is a sign of success in its results, regardless of what these results are according to our human and worldly calculations of gain or loss. What matters is that we refer matters to God in the beginning so that the calculation will be in our favour in the end.

For example, if you are running a business trying to make a profit, there is a possibility that you may lose your investment. But if you pray *istikhara* and lose, think deeply about it. You might find that you lost some of your investment now, but that larger profits will follow in a different business in the future, after you learnt from the lessons of your loss. It is also possible that God made you lose so that you will reconsider many things, people, and plans in your life, which you examine in an effort to find out why you lost. You may continue to lose, but win a close friend who helped you during the time of your troubles. Therefore, your real success in the end may be from making a profit in another deal, reconsidering your plans, or even winning a friend. *God knows, whereas you do not know* (Quran 2:216).

The human standards of success and failure are usually based on financial calculations or figures, or some sort of "statistically verifiable" achievement. However, these calculations, in God's sight, and in

reality, do not mean anything. What truly matters is God's pleasure in this life and the afterlife. So, if we refer to God in the beginning, the end will shine and God will be pleased, regardless of the material calculations.

This rule applies to everything. For example, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said that one of the seven persons whom God would protect with His Shade on the Day when there would be no shade but that from Him is "a youth who grew up with the worship of God."¹⁹ This young man or woman perfected the beginnings of their life; therefore God granted them success in the end and protected them under His Shade.

There will also be a sunrise in the beginning when one refrains from committing any sinful act and seeks to establish justice through all the affairs that he handles. On the contrary, if one commits forbidden acts in the beginning, surely the end will be a state of failure. *God does not further the works of those who spread corruption* (Quran 10:81). This is because doing the things that God made unlawful results in failure and obliterates blessings.

I pray to God to grant us happy and good endings. I also pray to God to help us refer to Him in every beginning so that we will achieve success in every end.

¹⁹ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

Tenth Step

Discovering one's flaws

Attempting to discover the flaws within you is better than attempting to discover the spiritual worlds hidden from you.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

One may start his journey to God the right way, but unfortunately, he may begin to feel conceited or think that he is doing God a favour and forget the fact that he has many flaws. After setting the rules of how to perfect the beginning of a new stage in the journey, Ibn Ata says: "Trying to discover the flaws within you is better than trying to discover the worlds hidden from you."

A believer who is active and has performed some extra acts of worship may feel a certain spiritual awakening. Then, he may think that he is able to feel or see the unseen or have the piercing sight about which the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Beware of the piercing sight of the believer, for he sees with the light of God."²⁰ Therefore, Ibn Ata warns us by saying: "Attempting to discover the flaws within you is better than attempting to discover the spiritual worlds hidden from you."

If one thinks that he is free from flaws, then surely there is a problem. Flaws are part of the nature of human beings. Only God has the attributes of perfection, glory to Him. And as much perfection as God has, this is the imperfection we have. God is the Generous, while humans are misers: *Say: "If you were to own all the treasure-houses of my Sustainer's bounty, you would still try to hold on to them tightly for fear of spending: for man has always been avaricious, whereas God is limitless in His bounty (Quran 17:100).*

²⁰ Reported by al-Tabarani.

God is Almighty, while humans are weak creatures. *God wants to lighten your burdens: for man has been created weak* (Quran 4:28). God is always Merciful, while humans can be cruel. God is Most Forbearing, while humans have limited patience. God is All-Forgiving, while humans do not forgive easily. God is All-Wise, while humans are prone to hasty judgments. God is the Knower, while humans have very limited knowledge. God is the Just, while humans are often unjust.

In addition to these imperfections, at this stage of the journey we should strive to discover specific flaws within ourselves. This is much better than trying to discover the worlds in the spiritual dimensions hidden from us. One cannot have true insight into the spiritual world before purifying himself, in any case.

Know that a person can never purify himself completely, but he should do as much as he can. Trying to mend one's inner self eventually helps in realising the quality of humbleness. A certain degree of self-purification and humbleness elevate us and bring about divinely bestowed knowledge and spiritual insights.

There are several ways through which to discover one's flaws. These include the following:

1. Criticism: If someone criticises you, think about it. Could this criticism help reveal a flaw? Take into consideration every criticism that comes from everyone, even those people with whom you are not on good terms. Ask yourself, what can be learned from this?
2. Friends: A good friend helps to reveal flaws by offering sincere advice. Umar b. al-Khattab (may God be pleased with him) said: "May God have mercy on the person who bestows on me my flaws." Umar considered this act of revealing one of his flaws as a gift. A sincere friend comes to you directly and tells you about your flaws nicely. Listen carefully to your friend and look within yourself for those flaws and try to eliminate or decrease them.
3. Trials: Tests and trials will reveal your flaws and shortcomings. God says: *Are they, then, not aware that they are being tested year-in, year-out? And yet, they do not repent from or remember [their mistakes]* (Quran 9:126). The verse refers to the hypocrites; God tests them,

but they never repent to Him and they do not think of God. If you are under pressure or tested, you have an opportunity to discover your flaws.

We pray to God to help us discover and fix our flaws. We pray to God to grant us forgiveness. He is the Most Generous.

Eleventh Step

Self-criticism

The origin of every sin, forgetfulness, and lust is in being self-righteous, and the origin of every good deed, awareness, and chastity is in being self-critical.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

After looking within ourselves and discovering our flaws, we must understand the origins of these flaws so that we can eliminate them. Thus, Ibn Ata says in this next step, “The origin of every sin, forgetfulness, and lust is in being self-righteous, and the origin of every good deed, awareness, and chastity is in being self-critical.”

The origin of flaws in general—whether they are sins, forgetfulness or lusts—is a false sense of self-righteousness. Many people tell themselves: “I am really good! And I am doing good deeds too. Look at others. They are lost, but I am guided. They are evil and I am fine. I do not have to worry.”

But God Almighty says: *Nay! I call to witness the Day of Resurrection! But nay! I call to witness the accusing voice of a human's own conscience!* (Quran 75:2). The accusing voice of a person's own conscience is something great enough for God to call as a witness! This is the inner voice of the believer who does not feel content with what he does and always blames himself.

In another verse we read: *And yet, I am not trying to absolve myself: for, verily, one's inner self does incite to evil, and only they upon whom my Sustainer bestows His grace are saved. Behold, my Sustainer is All-Forgiving, a Dispenser of Grace!* (Quran 12:53). This self-critical statement from the Quran was spoken by Prophet Yusuf/Joseph (peace be upon him), and that is how he felt. What about us?

The voice of a person's own conscience will save him on the Day of Judgment. And a person who does not have a conscience to blame himself is in danger. In the Quranic story of the two owners of

gardens, one of them was very content with himself. He even said: *And neither do I think that the Last Hour will ever come. But even if it should come, and I am brought before my Sustainer, I will surely find something even better than this as my last reward!* (Quran 18:36). He was confident that on the Day of Judgment, he will find a better garden than the one he had in this worldly life.

According to the Quran and the prophetic tradition, the default feeling of a believer should not be self-righteousness. This is what the Prophet (peace be upon him) taught his Companions. Hanzala, one of the Prophet's Companions, had knowledge about the names of the ten hypocrites of Medina who were unknown to the other Companions. Umar b. al-Khattab used to ask Hanzala if his name was among the ten hypocrites! Why did Umar ask Hanzala this question? Clearly, he did this because he did not feel self-righteous at all. In fact, it shows a high level of self-criticism that is rare to find.

Abu Bakr al-Siddiq used to say: "I would not feel safe from God's deep devising even if one of my feet was in Paradise." Why did Abu Bakr say this? Because he thought that he does not deserve Paradise as a guaranteed reward from God. This is Abu Bakr, about whom the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "If the faith of Abu Bakr is put on one side of the scale and the faith of the nation of believers is put on the other side, the side of Abu Bakr will outweigh the other side."

A feeling of self-righteousness is the origin of all sins, Ibn Ata teaches us. If one feels self-righteous and think that he has secured an exclusive or special status, surely he will start to feel that he cannot make mistakes. But if you fear God and think that you are the least of the believers, you will avoid committing evil deeds.

In these words of wisdom Ibn Ata is also talking about the forbidden lusts of arrogance, miserliness, greed, extravagance, and so forth. He explains that the sense of self-righteousness is the origin of every forbidden lust. If we avoid this feeling, we will keep away from falling into these lusts. This was the practice of the prophets, messengers, and righteous people.

However, the virtue of self-criticism should not turn into self-destruction. Self-destruction happens when a person blames himself so harshly that he begins to feel desperate. For example, if a person

continues to tell himself that he is no good, he has never done a sincere good deed, and so forth, he will eventually feel hopeless and abandon everything. This course of action is unacceptable.

Moderation and balance are virtues that lie between two vices; blaming oneself until one feels desperate and not blaming oneself at all until one becomes conceited. With moderation, our inner self will improve and we will advance in the course of our spiritual journey to God.

Twelfth Step

Good friends

Do not befriend someone who does not elevate you with his state, or guide you to God with his speech. It could be that you are doing evil, yet you think that you are doing good, because you are comparing yourself to your friend who is worse than you.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Throughout our journey to God we have learned how to search for our flaws. We have also learned that the origin of every sin, forgetfulness, and lust is in being self-righteous, and the origin of every good deed, awareness, and chastity is in being self-critical. Likewise, we have learned that one should be like the accusing voice of his conscience, which God called to witness in the Quran.

Here Ibn Ata teaches us about another serious flaw, the bad choice of friends. How should the believer choose his friends? Ibn Ata answers: “Do not befriend someone who does not elevate you with his state, or guide you to God with his speech. It could be that you are doing evil, yet you think that you are doing good, because you are comparing yourself to your friend who is worse than you.”

You either befriend someone who is better than you or someone who is worse than you. Ibn Ata says that when you befriend someone who is worse than you, you will think that you are being excellent in any case. But this is only because you are comparing yourself to your friend, who is a person with minor or major faults and does not care. However, if you befriend someone who elevates you with his state, or guides you to God with his speech; that is, someone who is better than you in terms of faith, this friend will have a good influence on you.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have said; “A good friend and a bad friend are like a perfume-seller and a blacksmith: The perfume-seller might give you some perfume as a gift, or you

might buy some from him, or at least you might smell its fragrance. As for the blacksmith, he might burn your clothes, and at the very least you will breathe in the fumes of his furnace.”²¹

If you befriend someone who is of a good character, he may give you some amount of perfume; a believer always has a good smell. He might also give you perfume in a moral sense, in the form of a piece of advice, reminder, Quranic wisdom, good guidance, or even a smile. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Smiling in the face of your brother is charity.”²² He might be a good example for you when you see him give charity, say a good word, or pray to God. You will find yourself participating with him in his good deeds.

The other person, who is like the blacksmith, might burn your clothes if he smokes! And if you get close to him, he may burn your heart by involving you in backbiting, gossip, false testimony, and other evil actions.

“Do not befriend someone who does not elevate you with his state.” A “state” is a Sufi expression for the spiritual influence that people have on one’s spirituality. This influence has been explained by the Prophet (peace be upon him) in different traditions. The Prophet said: “One dirham has become greater than a hundred thousand dirhams.” The Companions asked: “How can that be, O Messenger of God?” He replied, “A rich man takes a hundred thousand dirhams from his wealth and gives it away as charity. Another man has nothing except two dirhams, and so he takes one dirham and gives it away in charity.”²³ Here, the only difference between the two men is in the “state” of their hearts, even though the second man gave one hundred thousand more dirhams!

It is reported that the Prophet performed the *fajr* (dawn) prayer and he read the Surat al-Rum and he became confused in the recitation. When he finished the prayer, he said: “What about people who pray with us while they do not know how to perform their ablution. We became confused in the

²¹ Reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

²² Reported by Ibn Hibban and al-Tirmidhi.

²³ Reported by Ibn Hibban and al-Nasai.

recitation of the Quran because of them.”²⁴ This hadith is about the “state” of an individual; a state that negatively affected the whole congregation praying behind the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Jubayr b. Mutim reported, I heard the Prophet reciting Surat al-Tur in the *maghrib* (sunset) prayer, and when he reached the verse: *Or do they deny the existence of God? Have they themselves been created without anything that might have caused their creation? or were they, perchance, their own creators? And have they created the heavens and the earth? Nay, but they have no certainty of anything! How could they? Are your Sustainer’s treasures with them? Or are they in charge of destiny?* (Quran 52:35–37), Jubayr said: When I heard this, my heart was about to fly!²⁵

Ubayy b. Kab reported, I was in the mosque when a man entered and prayed and recited (the Quran) in a style to which I objected. Then another man entered (the mosque) and recited in a style different from that of his companion. When we had finished the prayer, we all went to God’s Messenger and said to him: This man recited in a style to which we objected, and the other entered and recited in a style different from that of his companion. The Messenger of God asked them to recite and so they recited, and the Messenger of God expressed approval of all their different recitations! There occurred in my mind a sort of denial which has never occurred to me even during the Days of Ignorance before Islam. When the Messenger of God saw how I was affected, he struck my chest gently, whereupon I broke into a sweat and felt as though I were looking at God with fear.²⁶

It is as if the Prophet blamed Ubayy for doubting the authenticity of the Quran, just because it could be read in different Arabic dialects. Ubayy eventually became one of the members of the committee that wrote down the whole Quran when it was later collected in one book during the time of the third caliph. When the Prophet struck his chest, Ubayy’s state changed from that of doubt to that of excellence; “to worship God as though you are seeing Him, and while you see Him not yet truly He

²⁴ Reported by al-Nasai.

²⁵ Reported by al-Bukhari.

²⁶ Reported by Muslim.

sees you.” When Ubayy said, “as though I were looking at God with fear,” he was describing the state to which the Prophet moved him in a moment. The state of the Prophet himself (peace be upon him) is the secret behind his ability to change the state of Ubayy.

I have witnessed this in some of my teachers, whose one-word comment on something could elevate my “state” for days. On certain occasions, some may not even speak at all, yet they influenced me deeply with a high state of remembering God that they were experiencing.

Then Ibn Ata says: “And does not guide you to God with his speech.” This is the next level of friends; a friend who does not necessarily elevate you with his state, but guides you to God with his words.

Thirteenth Step

Perseverance in the remembrance of God

Do not stop mentioning God just because your heart is not present. Forgetting Him completely is worse than being inattentive while you are mentioning Him; perhaps He will elevate you from being inattentive to being attentive, and from being attentive to being fully present with Him, and from being fully present with Him to being fully absent from anything but Him. *This is not difficult for God* (Quran 35:17).

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Along the path of our journey, we progress through stages, purification, searching for our flaws, and attempting to get rid of them. These words of wisdom tackle a serious flaw of the soul, “forgetfulness”; that is, the lack of the remembrance of God. We often fall into this error throughout the day, and the solution is to remember God, with our tongues or in our hearts.

God says *And remember your Sustainer humbly and with awe, and without raising your voice, in the mornings and in the evenings; and do not allow yourself to be heedless* (Quran 7:205), *remember Him as the One who guided you* (Quran 2:198), *bear God in mind—since it is He who taught you what you did not previously know* (Quran 3:239), *and when you have finished your prayer, remember God—standing and sitting and lying down* (Quran 4:103), *O you who have attained to faith! Remember God with unceasing remembrance. And extol His limitless glory from morn to evening* (Quran 33:41–42), *so remember Me, and I shall remember you* (Quran 2:152). The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Always keep your tongue busy with God’s remembrance.”²⁷ These are clear directions to remember God in all times and in every situation. The Prophet used to mention God in all situations, and for every situation he had a special supplication, which is in itself a form of mentioning God.

²⁷ Reported by al-Tirmidhi and Ibn Maja.

Mentioning God brings about a state of rest in the heart and this draws one closer to God. We read in the Quran: *Those who believe, and whose hearts find their rest in the remembrance of God—for, verily, in the remembrance of God hearts do find their rest* (Quran 13:28). Mentioning God is the ultimate goal of any act of worship. God says: *and be constant in prayer, so as to remember Me!* (Quran 20:14). This means that the objective of the prayer itself is God's remembrance. And God's remembrance is even greater than prayer in terms of restraining ourselves from evil. God says: *behold, prayer restrains people from loathsome deeds and from all that runs counter to reason; but remembrance of God is indeed the greatest good* (Quran 29:45).

Ibn Ata assumes that we mention God's name all the time, and is addressing the problem of not feeling that remembrance in our hearts. Should I stop God's remembrance when I do not feel it in my heart? Or should I continue with God's remembrance despite that?

Ibn Ata says: "Do not stop mentioning God just because your heart is not present. Forgetting Him completely is worse than being inattentive while you are mentioning Him; perhaps He will elevate you from being inattentive to being attentive, and from being attentive to being fully present with Him, and from being fully present with Him to being fully absent from anything but Him." *This is not difficult for God.*

This means that if your heart is not present when you mention God, do not stop mentioning God. This is the case when, for example, you are reading the Quran but cannot reflect on the verses you are reading because your mind is so busy with something else. It is also the case when you recite the regular *dhikr*, but do not feel the meanings of *subhana Allah* (glory be to God), *al-hamdullilah* (praise be to God), or *la illaha illa Allah* (there is not god but God). Here the shaykh says that in such cases, do not stop mentioning God.

Ibn Ata explains: Forgetting Him completely is worse than being inattentive while you are mentioning Him. The least degree of mentioning God is when you mention Him while you are inattentive, but at least you know what you are saying. Recall the verse in which God says: *O you who have attained to faith! do not attempt to pray while you are in a state of drunkenness, but wait until you know what you*

are saying (Quran 4:43). Perhaps, and God is Most Generous, He will elevate you from being inattentive to being attentive. If you continue, hoping that God will change your inattentiveness, He will elevate you to the state of being attentive. Then, if you continue, He might raise you to an even higher state of heart.

Ibn Ata says: “Perhaps He will elevate you from being attentive to being fully present with Him.” Being fully present with Him is a degree higher than being attentive, that is, the servant’s heart is present while mentioning God. This means that when you mention Paradise, you call it to your mind, and when you mention God, you call to your mind His glory and favours. And so on.

This presence of the heart is what Ali b. Abi Talib (may God be pleased with him) described in his famous sermon about the characteristics of those who are conscious of God. Imam Ali said: “When they come across a verse that inspires awe they bend the ears of their hearts towards it, and feel as though the sound of hell and its cries are reaching their ears. If they come across a verse creating eagerness for Paradise, they pursue it avidly, and their spirits turn towards it eagerly, and they feel as if it is right there in front of them.” This is being attentive.

It is not difficult for God to elevate us from being inattentive to being attentive, and from being attentive to being fully present with Him. If we are elevated to such a level, we will be like the Companions who felt and heard the unseen world of Paradise and Hell.

Then, Ibn Ata talks about a very special state of heart. He says: “Then God will elevate you from being fully present with Him to being fully absent from anything but Him.” This is a heart that mentions God and does not feel anything around it. This is a godly favour which, if bestowed on any believer once a day or twice a week, he will be most blessed. There is a difference between deep intellectual reflection upon God, and being emotionally absent from anything but God, even for a moment.

To give one example, this is the state that made someone like Abdullah b. al-Zubayr, the great Companion, not sense the falling of one of the walls of his house while he was praying. In fact, during his prayers, birds landed on the top of his head, thinking that they were landing on a tree! After his

prayers, he was asked why he did not leave the prayers and avoid the danger, and his reply was that he did not even hear a sound!

This high state, however, has nothing to do with those who claim that they are nothing but God, and that they are not part of this world, etc. This is too much of an exaggeration.

Finally, Ibn Ata quotes the verse, *this is not difficult for God* (Quran 35:17). The context of that verse in its chapter is the following: *O people! It is you who stand in need of God, whereas He alone is self-sufficient, the One to whom all praise is due. If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring forth a new creation: this is not difficult for God* (Quran 35:15–17). Let us hope that, out of God's mercy and generosity, He will do away with our forgetful selves and bring forth a new creation in us; a creation that mentions Him deeply and fully. We learned from the first word of wisdom that we must not rely on our good actions and we must put our trust in His mercy alone.

Fourteenth Step

Freedom from humiliation, neediness, and illusion

The tree of humiliation stems from a seed of neediness. Nothing deceives as much as illusion. You are free from what you give up, and you are a slave to what you need badly.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Purifying the heart to allow for beautification and illumination is still part of the process of searching for flaws. Trying to discover the flaws within you is better than trying to discover the worlds hidden from you, as mentioned before.

One of the flaws that the Shaykh explains here is “humiliation.” One might ask: How can humiliation be my fault and not the fault of the people who humiliated me? The answer is that suffering from humiliation is one’s own fault! The Shaykh explains that the direct reason for being humiliated by people is the neediness in one’s heart towards the people. Ibn Ata eloquently expresses this in the following words: “The tree of humiliation (by people) stems from a seed of neediness (to them).” A seed of the feeling of being in need of people grows into a tree of humiliation. This tree is watered with words and actions, through which the needy beg for what they want from people, and thus end up in a state of humiliation. Neediness makes you a slave to others, not to God.

But what is the reason behind my neediness? It is my “illusion.” Ibn Ata says: “Nothing deceives as much as illusion. You are free from what you give up, and you are a slave to what you are in need of.” The one who is need of what people have might think that those people will actually benefit or harm him, and this is an illusion. The real One who benefits or harms you is your Lord.

Out of illusion, one might think that people who have power or wealth, for example, will bring benefit or harm to him. Thus, one allows himself to be humiliated by the people he is in need of. In fact, people never bring benefit or cause harm to others. Neediness is the source of humiliation, and

illusion is the source of neediness. Freedom from all of this is the solution and is another step in God's way.

It is true that one must interact with people, ask them for help or a favour. There is nothing wrong with this as long as seeking peoples' help does not bring with any neediness in one's heart, which in turn produces humiliation and servitude. It is all about the feeling of neediness or humiliation in the heart; this is the flaw that the Shaykh advises us to eliminate.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) says: "Ask for your needs with dignity." It is normal to ask for your needs, but when you ask people to do you a favour or ask them for money, you must ask them with dignity—without begging or feeling humiliated. Do not plant the seed of neediness in your heart, or it will lead to humiliation that grows like a tree, God forbid, and eventually, humiliation transforms us into slaves to others than God.

If you free yourself from the illusion that people have the ability to benefit or harm you, you will be saved, and you will deal with people with the right state of heart. The Prophet (peace be upon him) gave Ibn Abbas (may God be pleased with him) the following advice, and Ibn Abbas at that time was a young boy. The Prophet said: "O young lad! Know that if the whole nation were to unite and try to benefit you with something, they would never benefit you except by that which God has written for you. And if the whole nation were to unite and try to harm you with something, they would never be able to harm you except with that which God had written for you."²⁸

Real freedom comes from servitude to God. This is the definition of freedom in the Islamic worldview. And if you are a true servant of God, then you are free from other than Him. You are free from human beings, material things, and even from your own desires. You are free from any social, political, psychological, or financial pressure. You are free from all this because "you gave up on them," as Ibn Ata so eloquently puts it. You have no illusion, no neediness, and no humiliation, and you have your freedom.

²⁸ Reported by al-Tirmidhi.

Finally, these precious words of wisdom can be understood from another perspective. Consider the following additions between brackets: The tree of servitude (to God) stems from a seed of neediness (to God). Nothing deceives you as your illusion (that you are not in need of God). You are free from what you gave up (which is the “others”), and you are a slave to what you are in need of (who is your Lord).

Let us also work on nurturing the tree of servitude and the sense of neediness to God alone, and let us give up on “others.” This will lead us to the next step on our journey.

Fifteenth Step

Thanking God for His blessings

You risk losing your blessings when you do not thank Him for them, and you tie them to you firmly when you do. And if you do not advance towards Him by doing excellent deeds, He will pull you towards Him with the chain of tests.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

One of the universal laws of God which governs the issue of providence in all its forms is the reality that if we thank God, He will multiply the blessings or replace them with something better. God says: *If you are grateful [to Me], I shall most certainly give you more and more* (Quran 14:7).

God declared that we will not be able to count all God's blessings. God says: *and should you try to count God's blessings, you could never compute them* (Quran 14:34). Every Muslim should do his best to thank God for whatever He gives him.

Then God says: *but if you are ungrateful (kafartum), verily, My chastisement will be severe indeed!* (Quran 14:7). In this verse, the Arabic word *kafartum*, means being unthankful to God for His blessings. It does not mean disbelief in God, as the literal meaning implies, but it shows the gravity of this flaw. Lack of gratitude then, is another flaw that Ibn Ata teaches us in these words of wisdom.

Ibn Ata says: "You risk losing your blessings when you do not thank Him for them, and you tie them to you firmly when you do." The one who thanks God for His blessings, is tying them to him firmly. God's promise to reward those who thank Him is a true promise. It is a guarantee for the continuation of your blessings, or more. It does come with one condition, however, which is to thank God for these blessings.

Thankfulness is not limited to saying *al-hamdullilah* (praise to God), it can be offered through action. God says: *Labour, O David's people, in gratitude towards Me* (Quran 34:13). Thankfulness through

action requires that everyone ask himself, what am I going to do with this blessing? Am I going to use it in a good way? Am I going to contribute with it to good causes? Or am I going to waste it—and this is a form of denying the blessing.

Therefore, if you do not thank God for His blessings with words and actions, you risk losing them. But if you thank God, you are tying His blessings to you firmly.

Then the Shaykh says: “And if you do not advance towards Him by doing excellent deeds, He will pull you towards Him with the chain of tests.” Thus, if you do not thank God for His blessings and advance to Him until you reach the level of excellence, God will test you. By giving you tests, God offers you a chance to reach the level of excellence. This is also a universal law.

Through tests, God elevates you and purifies your heart. When you are afflicted with tests, you draw closer to God and He forgives your sins. God says: *And, indeed, We tested them [the hypocrites] through suffering, but they did not abase themselves before their Sustainer; and they will never humble themselves* (Quran 23:76). When God gives you tests, you humble yourself, and pray to God. God also says about the hypocrites: *Are they, then, not aware that they are being tested year-in, year-out? And yet, they do not repent and do not bethink themselves [of God]* (Quran 9:126).

God does not test you to punish you. He wants to draw you closer to Him and to make you count the blessings which He bestows on you. He wants you to thank Him with your words and actions.

When God tests you by removing some blessings, He is testing you with a “touch of chastisement,” as the other verse says. Every one of us has billions of uncountable blessings. When God puts one of us to a test by losing one, two, or even five blessings, we feel that we are faced with a severe crisis. While in reality we have billions of blessings which God bestows on us every moment.

In every cell in our bodies there are countless blessings. In every second we live, there are countless blessings. In every breath we breathe, there are countless blessings. In every glance, there are countless blessings. God is the One who is worthy of thankfulness. When God tests us by removing one or two blessings, according to Ibn Ata, He is “pulling you towards Him.” By losing a blessing,

God wants us to return and repent to Him. He also wants us to remember His blessings and reflect on them.

And if you sincerely repent to God, the test is over. God says: *And, behold, with every hardship comes ease: verily, with every hardship comes ease!* (Quran 94:5–6). God repeats the verse twice. In another verse we read: *God will grant, after hardship, ease* (Quran 65:7). Sometimes matters get worse, but God makes a way out and with difficulty comes ease. When you are faced with a problem or afflicted with a calamity, God brings ease in the middle of the crisis and also after the crisis. And, when the state of hardship draws you closer to God, this is, in itself, a blessing from God.

If we want to avoid trials at all, we must continuously advance towards God and never fall into error. In reality, this cannot happen because we are human! We cannot maintain a clear record, thanking God all the time. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Every son of Adam makes mistakes, but the best of those who make mistakes are those who repent.”²⁹ God helps us in our journey by testing us, in order to give us a chance to repent.

²⁹ Reported by al-Tirmidhi.

Sixteenth Step

Understanding God's giving and depriving

You might think that He is giving you (something), while in reality He is depriving you! And you might think that He is depriving you, while in reality He is giving you (something)! If through your deprivation, He opens the doors of understanding for you, then this deprivation is a gift. You feel that your deprivation is dreadful because you do not understand. He might open the door of worship for you, but does not open the door of acceptance. And you might be destined to sin, but this becomes a means of ascension towards Him. A sin that produces humbleness and need is better than an act of worship that produces arrogance and prejudice.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

At times God gives and at other times He deprives. God might test us through “good” and “bad,” through “fortune” and “hardship,” or through bestowing “blessings” on us or “depriving” us from them. But the reality of each of the above could turn out to be different from the way we label it and the assumptions we make about it.

At this stage in our journey to God, Ibn Ata teaches us the importance of forming a deep understanding of the wisdom behind God's “giving” and “depriving.” God says: *But as for a human, whenever his Sustainer tries him by His generosity and by letting him enjoy a life of ease, he says, “My Sustainer has been generous towards me”; whereas, whenever He tries him by tightening his means of livelihood, he says, “My Sustainer has disgraced me!” But nay* (Quran 89:15-17). “Nay” here means that this is not a correct understanding of having “a life of ease” or “tight means.”

Here God says that when He tries us by tightening our means of livelihood, this does not mean that He is disgracing us. And when He tries us by letting us enjoy a life of ease for a while, this is not necessarily good. The question is, how can we judge?

The Shaykh draws our attention to the very important meaning of these words of wisdom—that of “understanding” (*fahm*): “If through your deprivation, He opens the doors of understanding for you, then this deprivation is a gift.” And this is how we judge. If God deprives us and we lose some of our wealth, opportunity, health, or family, and at the same time, He opens the doors of “understanding,” then this is not deprivation. It is a gift. In this case, the trial is a gift.

Before forming the correct “understanding,” we were looking at the material level only, at the level of the five senses, and the numbers and figures. For example, if I say I lost ten thousand dollars or I lost my health: this is a material calculation at the material level.

But God might take ten thousand dollars and give me the ability to understand, a feeling of contentment, a good deed, a strong will, a good friend, and closeness to Him, on top of all that. Thus, my loss of ten thousand dollars becomes, actually, a gift. It is even possible that God will give me a hundred thousand dollars later, if I work hard and try to learn from my lessons.

We must understand the actual meaning of giving and deprivation. Sometimes, we think that a specific thing is a deprivation while it is the actual giving, and vice versa. A person might earn a large amount of money, for example, but not thank God in word or by actions. This might continue and he might waste his money in evil ways. Then, God may even give this person more wealth and opportunities to return to Him. God says: *for, behold, though I may give them rein for a while, My subtle scheme is exceedingly firm!* (Quran 68:45). *Then, when they had forgotten all that they had been told to take to heart, We threw open to them the gates of all good things until—even as they were rejoicing in what they had been granted—We suddenly took them to task: and lo! they were broken in spirit; and in the end, the last remnant of those folk who had been bent on evildoing was wiped out. For all praise is due to God, the Sustainer of all the worlds* (Quran 6:44–45).

If God opens the doors of providence for you or grants you a request, He is calling you, as the Shaykh said, to understand. First, thank God so that the blessing is tied to you. Second, reflect upon the wisdom and the meaning behind this giving and be cautious about the trial it might involve.

The Shaykh gives two specific examples. He says: “He might open the door of worship for you, but does not open the door of acceptance. And you might be destined to sin, but this becomes a means to ascension towards Him.”

God might open doors for you and you find yourself doing some good, such as praying, memorising the Quran, giving in charity, fasting, performing hajj, attending a course, teaching people, or leading them in the way of religion. But be cautious. Sometimes you imagine that worship is in itself a gift from God, but in reality it is not. Why? Because one might perform the action and miss the reward.

God says: *They who spend their possessions for the sake of God and do not thereafter mar their spending by stressing their own benevolence and hurting the feelings of the needy shall have their reward with their Sustainer* (Quran 2:262). Here is an example of a good deed, charity, which is marred and rendered void by another action, such as hurting the feelings of the needy. This later action nullifies the charity and closes the door of acceptance and heavenly reward.

Some people do good, only to show off and be praised by people, thus leading themselves to punishment. *Behold, the hypocrites seek to deceive God—while it is He who causes them to be deceived by themselves. And when they rise to pray, they rise reluctantly, only to be seen and praised by people, remembering God but seldom* (Quran 4:142). The main purpose of an act of worship is sincerity and gaining moral and spiritual benefit from it. A ritual devoid of sincerity and moral and spiritual benefit is worthless. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: “Whoever does not give up forged speech and evil actions, God is not in need of his leaving food and drink in fasting.” This means that God will not accept his fasting, which looks like a good deed while it is not.

Another example from the Shaykh relates to the issue of acts of worship and sinning, and requires an accurate understanding. The Shaykh says: “And you might be destined to sin, but this becomes a means of ascension towards Him.” Imam Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya says something similar in this regard: “A sin may produce humbleness and need so that it takes one to Paradise. An act of worship may produce pride and prejudice so that it takes one to hell.”

Of course, sinning itself does not lead one to enter Paradise. But if the sin already happened and the person who committed it repents sincerely to God, it might be good, in the larger picture. This is true if the person repents, changes his ways, and always remembers his sin with grief and tries his best to compensate with good deeds. In this case, sinning that produces humbleness and need becomes a gift from God, in the long term.

But this does not mean that one should commit a sin and say that I am sinning in order to eventually be humble and repent to God. This is a wrong and deviant understanding that was unfortunately adopted by some ignorant people who claimed to be Sufis.

On the other hand, an act of worship that produces arrogance in one's heart is an evil deed, not a good one. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "He who has in his heart the weight of a mustard seed of arrogance shall not enter Paradise."

These matters depend on our response. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "How wonderful is the affair of the believer, for his affairs are all good, and this applies to no one but the believer. If something good happens to him, he is thankful for it and that is good for him. If something bad happens to him, he bears it with patience and that is good for him." This hadith indicates that we are the ones who bring good or bad outcomes to ourselves. It is all up to us! If we are thankful to God for the good things that happen, this is good for us. If we are patient when bad things happen to us, this is also good for us. However, if we are arrogant when good things happen, this is an evil outcome. If we are impatient when bad things happen, this is also an evil outcome. Thus, based on our reactions, we determine whether what happens to us is a heavenly gift or otherwise.

But God always chooses what is best for people, and it is up to them to decide how they receive God's choices. *In Your hand, God, is all good. Verily, You have the power to will anything* (Quran 3:26).

Seventeenth Step

Enjoying God's company and praying to Him

If He takes you away from people, then know that He is opening to you the doors of His company.

And if He allows you to ask, then know that He wants to give you something.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

These words of wisdom are another example related to understanding God's giving and depriving.

The Shaykh says: "If He takes you away from people, then know that He is opening to you the doors of His company." Sometimes God may test us with the death of a spouse, a brother, or a dear person.

We might find ourselves travelling to a remote country for one reason or another. We might find ourselves in jail, God forbid, or suddenly alone in a hospital. In all these cases, we may feel lonely and isolated. Yet, this could be another step in our journey to God!

The Shaykh makes it clear that all such trials might be gifts from God in the form of trials. There are unconfirmed reports in which the Prophet says: "If God wishes to benefit someone, He will take him away from people." The meaning of this hadith may be true in light of the wisdom discussed here.

When you feel lonely, God is opening a door of uninterrupted remembrance and meditation. Being in His company is something that you might not be able to feel if you are a person who mixes with people all the time, day and night. You might think that isolation is a trial, whereas in reality it is a gift.

One of my teachers often recalls some stages of his life which he spent in jail and says: "If it were not for that jail, I would not have written most of my books or developed most of my ideas." Thus, imprisonment and loneliness were a reason for being in God's company and benefiting people with his knowledge. This is a gift.

Then the Shaykh says: “And if He allows you to ask, then know that He wants to give you something.” This means that God may test you with something so difficult that there is no solution except to pray to God. Perhaps before that time of trial, you did not pray sincerely enough to God. You might have thought that you were not in need of prayer or distress. Yet, when a serious crisis comes and the only solution is God’s help, then prayers are much deeper and more sincere. *Who is it that responds to the distressed when he calls out to Him?* (Quran 27:62).

Praying to God may continue for days or weeks without an apparent end to your trials. This could be another precious gift from God, not because of your deprivation, but because of your continuous state of worship. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Supplication is the true worship.”³⁰

But the Shaykh says: “And if He allows you to ask, then know that He wants to give you something.” God gives abundant rewards just for praying to Him. Not only that, but He answers those who pray to Him, either in this world or the next, or both. Therefore, God allows us to ask because He wants to give us something. If you ask a generous person for help, surely he will answer you. What about if you ask God Himself!

Deprivation and giving should not be measured by human standards, which are based on material gains. The true standard is our relation with God. Sometimes God puts you to a test and after God removes the affliction your relation with Him improves. This is in itself a gift from God.

³⁰ Reported by al-Tirmidhi.

Eighteenth Step

Ascending in the levels of worship

God diversified the acts of worship because He knows how quickly you become bored. And He did not permit you certain acts of worship at certain times so you do not go to extremes. The objective is to perfect your prayers, not to merely perform them. Not every performer of prayers perfects them.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

The words of wisdom discussed here relate to a very important topic in our journey to God—the quality of worship. A believer who worships continuously may feel bored at some point. God, out of His mercy, knows that we humans, could naturally feel bored, even in worship. Therefore, He diversified the acts of worship so that we can worship God in a variety of ways.

For example, prayer is a fixed act of worship that must be performed five times a day. But God recommended other forms of supererogatory prayers, such as the late-night prayer, the prayer of thankfulness, and prayer in times of need, and so forth. If the believer feels bored by (optional) prayers, he may perform the obligatory prayers only, but at the same time he may involve himself in other forms of worship, such as charity, performing *umra*, seeking knowledge, being kind to neighbours and relatives, helping people, and so forth. All these are forms of worship that draw one closer to God.

People are different, and diversity is a universal law of God. Diversity is not limited to natural capabilities only, but there is diversity in one's ability to keep up with certain actions and enjoy them. Here the Shaykh is also referring to God's knowledge about our desire to continue our worship without a pause. In His infinite knowledge, He prohibited some acts of worship at certain times. As mentioned before, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Surely this religion is firm. So apply it with tenderness. The traveller who is too harsh on his riding animal will not reach his destination and the riding animal will die." This is why the Prophet recommended that we do not pray right after the

sunrise, right before noon time, or in the late afternoon after the *asr* prayer. The wisdom behind not praying any recommended prayer in these times is to make us eager to perform them when we are allowed. The same applies to fasting. We are not permitted to fast at certain times, for example, immediately before the beginning of Ramadan or on the first day of Eid.

When God opens for you the door of reading the Quran, you may wish to read it all the time. But we are not allowed to read the Quran while kneeling down or prostrating in prayer, in the bathroom, or while we are in a state of impurity. Because God knows our nature, He diversified the acts of worship and prohibited them at certain times.

Then, when God guides you to perform an act of worship, perfect it and ascend in the levels of quality of worship. The Shaykh gives the example of prayer, when he says: “The objective is to perfect your prayers, not to merely perform them. Not every performer of prayer perfects them.” When God talks about prayer in the Quran, he asked us to *establish prayers* (Quran 2:43). Establishing the prayer is different from merely performing it. Establishing the prayer is about concentration and humbleness during the prayer. God says: *Truly, to a happy state shall attain the believers, those who humble themselves in their prayer* (Quran 23:1–2). Humbleness is the objective of avoiding the performance of prayer at certain times. If one feels bored, or goes to extremes and prays non-stop, humbleness cannot be achieved.

According to Sufis, humbleness in prayers (*khushu*) is a branch of knowledge. This is supported by the prophetic tradition in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) talked about the signs of the Day of Judgment, as reported by Abu al-Darda: “We were with the Prophet. He looked at the sky and said: This is a time when knowledge is abandoned by people so that they cannot do anything. Then he said: If you want, I can tell you about the first branch of knowledge that will be abandoned by people; it is humbleness in prayers. You may enter a big mosque but you do not see one man in a state of humbleness.”³¹

³¹ Reported by al-Tirmidhi.

In fact, scholars divide humbleness in prayers into three levels; humiliation, awe, and happiness.

The first level is humiliation. This means that we pray to God and feel humiliated before Him. This is reflected in the movements of the prayer. We kneel down and prostrate only to God. These movements are a manifestation of humiliation, which should be shown only to God. Humiliation requires that we feel our weakness and sense that God is the Powerful, the Rich, and the Almighty. Humiliation is the result of neediness, as the Shaykh explained before, when he said: “The tree of humiliation stems from a seed of neediness.” When we feel we are in need of God, a state of humbleness is produced.

The second level is awe of God. The higher level is to elevate us from the stage of humiliation to the stage of feeling awe of God and His Might. God says: *whenever the messages of the Most Gracious were conveyed unto them [the prophets], they would fall down before Him, prostrating themselves and weeping* (Quran 19:58). This is the level of feeling awe of God, a level that sometimes leads to crying. *God bestows from on high the best of all teachings in the shape of a divine writ fully consistent within itself, repeating each statement [of the truth] in manifold forms [a divine writ] whereat shiver the skins of all who stand in awe of their Sustainer: [but] in the end their skins and their hearts do soften at the remembrance of [the grace of] God. Such is God's guidance: He guides therewith him that wills [to be guided] whereas he whom God lets go astray can never find any guide* (Quran 39:23). One of the Companions reported that he watched the Prophet (peace be upon him) as he was praying. He said that he heard a whistling sound from the chest of the Prophet resembling the sound of a boiling kettle as he was weeping.³²

The third level is happiness. The best state of humbleness in prayer is happiness and pleasure being in the presence of God. This feeling of happiness and elation when reading the Quran, mentioning God or praising Him is the highest level of humbleness in prayers. Angels descend from the heavens to listen and a state of tranquillity prevails in the area.

³² Reported by Abu Dawud.

It is reported that while Usayd b. Hudayr was reciting Surat al-Baqara (the second chapter of the Quran) at night, and his horse was tied beside him, the horse was suddenly startled and troubled. When he stopped reciting, the horse became quiet, and when he started again, the horse was startled again. Then he stopped reciting and the horse became quiet too. He started reciting again and the horse was startled and troubled once again. Then he stopped reciting and his son, Yahya was beside the horse. He was afraid that the horse might trample on him. When he took the boy away and looked towards the sky, he could not see it. All he saw was a low cloud full of lamps! The next morning he informed the Prophet, who said, "Recite, O Ibn Hudayr! Recite, O Ibn Hudayr!" Ibn Hudayr replied, "O God's Messenger! My son, Yahya was near the horse and I was afraid that it might trample on him, so I looked towards the sky, and went to him. When I looked at the sky, I saw something like a cloud containing what looked like lamps, so I went out in order not to see it." The Prophet said, "Do you know what that was?" Ibn Hudayr replied, "No." The Prophet said, "Those were angels who came near you for your voice and if you had kept on reciting till dawn, it would have remained there till morning when people would have seen it as it would not have disappeared."³³

Al-Bara reported that a person was reciting Surat al-Kahf and there was a horse tied with two ropes at his side, a cloud overshadowed him, and as it began to come nearer and nearer his horse began to take fright from it. He went and mentioned this to the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the morning, and the Prophet said: "That was Tranquillity. It came down at the recitation of the Quran."³⁴

Bear in mind, however, that when God takes you to a level of happiness in your prayers, this will be out of His Grace, not because of your deeds. A poem in Arabic says:

In the twinkling of an eye.
God may change everything.
From one state to another.

³³ Reported by al-Bukhari.

³⁴ Reported by Muslim.

However, there are means that one could follow in order to ascend to that level, by God's grace.

Among these is to reflect upon the meaning of the Quran, and develop humbleness by calling to mind God's greatness.

The three levels mentioned above may be expressed in various forms of worship, not only in prayer.

The level of submission (*islam*) to God is the outward work. In prayers, it is performing the motions of the prayers by standing, kneeling down, and prostrating. In charity, it is giving money. In fasting, it is abstaining from eating and drinking. In pilgrimage, it is circumambulating around the Kaaba, going between the two hills of Safa and Marwa, and offering the sacrifice.

The level of belief (*iman*) is the work of the heart. The basic work of the heart is to believe in God, His angels, His scriptures, His messengers, the Day of Judgment, and God's creation of all things to come, good or bad. All this gives a wider meaning to the rituals. Prayer is not only about kneeling down and prostrating, it is also about humbleness, feeling awe of God, and happiness. Charity is not merely the act of giving money, it is about having mercy upon the poor and being indifferent to the world. Fasting is not only about abstaining from food and drink, it is also about patience, mentioning God, thankfulness, and meditation. Pilgrimage is not only walking or jogging around the Kaaba, going between the two hills of Safa and Marwa and offering the sacrifice, it is also about remembering the Hereafter, uniting with fellow believers, and following the steps of the prophets and messengers.

The level of excellence (*ihsan*) comes next. It involves worshipping God as though you see Him, and (knowing that) while you see Him not yet truly He sees you.

In terms of remembrance, as the Shaykh explained, the level of attentiveness is the level of submission (*islam*), that is, be attentive when you read the Quran or when you mention God. The level of being present with God is the level of belief (*iman*), that is, reflect on the meaning so you feel awe of God. The level of being absent from anything else is the level of excellence (*ihsan*), in which you do not pay attention to what is going around you, but are fully present with God.

We pray to God to elevate us from submission to belief, and from belief to excellence.

Nineteenth Step

Calls of distress

The best way to ask Him is through expressing your distress, and the fastest way to acquire good traits is through expressing your humility and need.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

The words of wisdom discussed here concern *dua* (supplication). It is not about the etiquette of supplication, but the condition of the heart during supplication.

God asks the disbelievers about their own experiences: *Who is it that responds to the distressed when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill, and has made you inherit the earth? Could there be any divine power besides God?* (Quran 27:62). In this verse God makes it clear to the disbelievers that when they were in distress and sincerely asked God for help, He answered them. If this is the case with disbelievers in distress, what about if a believer is in distress and asks His Lord for help!

Therefore, with distress the supplication is answered quickly. The Shaykh says: “The best way to ask Him is through your distress.” If you are in distress and ask God sincerely, while feeling the need for His help after the means have failed you, then rest assured that God will answer your supplication.

This applies not only to asking God for worldly help, but also for help with matters of faith as well. The best way to ask Him to guide you is also through distress, need, humility, and hope in His mercy. This is best illustrated in the Prophet’s supplication in different situations.

In the battle of Badr the Prophet (peace be upon him) turned towards the *qibla* (prayer direction), stretched out his arms and began to supplicate his Lord: “O God, accomplish for me what You have promised me. O God, bring about what You have promised me. O God, if this small band of Muslims is destroyed, you will not be worshipped on this earth after today!” He continued his supplication to

God for a long time, until his mantle slipped down from his shoulders.³⁵ This is a supplication from someone in distress, and it was a supplication that was answered swiftly.

Then the Shaykh explained other useful aspects of supplication. He said, “And the fastest way to acquire good traits is through expressing your humility and need.” Some scholars comment on the verse, *charity is for the poor* (Quran 9:60), saying that: If a person gives charity to a poor person in need, what if the poor person shows his need to God? Surely God will give him out of His bounties, even more than what another person might give him.

According to the prophetic traditions we know, the person who performs a supplication should face the *qibla* (prayer direction), stretch out his hand while praying to God, and start the supplication by praising God and invoking peace and blessing on the Prophet. It is also recommended that he invoke peace and blessing on the Prophet in the middle and at the end of the supplication. This is the outward act of supplication. However, what is more important is the condition of the heart when praying to God; this we often neglect even when we follow the Prophet in other ways.

The Prophet used to recite certain prayers in certain situations, such as getting up in the morning, going to bed, getting dressed, taking off his clothes, looking in the mirror, washing himself, sleeping, seeing a new moon, in the evening, in the morning, going out, coming back home, and so on. It is not enough that we follow the Prophet by memorising and uttering these supplications. We must acquire the spirit behind them, which is to be connected with God at all times.

If we trace the history of supplication, we will not find any person, even previous prophets, who made a continuous stream of supplications as much as the Prophet Muhammad did. If we survey the Psalms, the Torah, and the Gospel, we will not come across as many supplications as we find when we study Muhammad’s tradition (peace be upon him).

Moreover, we also learn that the Prophet Muhammad’s supplications were accompanied by deep emotions. Aisha, the Prophet’s wife, was asked by Ata about the most amazing event she witnessed

³⁵ Reported by Muslim.

about the Messenger of God. She cried and said: What was not amazing about him? One night he came and got in bed with me. My skin touched his and he said: “O Abu Bakr’s daughter, let me go! Let me worship my Lord.” I said: “I love being with you, but I prefer to do as you wish.” I let him. He got up and took ablution without wasting water. Then he started praying and crying. He cried so much that his tears flowed down his chest. Then he bent for *ruqu* and cried. Then he prostrated for *sujud* and continued to cry. Then he raised his head and still cried. He continued to cry until morning. When it was time for the dawn prayer (*fajr*), Bilal came and recited the *adhan* (call to prayer). And then I said: “O the Messenger of God! What makes you cry? God has forgiven your sins, those committed and yet to be committed.” He said: “Shall I not be a thankful servant to God? Shall I not give Him thanks?”³⁶

Prayers may be answered immediately and may be answered later. The Prophet is reported to have said: A servant will be rewarded on the Day of Judgment for supplications to God, even the ones that have not been answered, the reward will be great such that he wishes that his supplication was never answered.”

When God does not answer your prayers immediately, be certain that God is choosing the best for you. God has always been choosing the best for you. God says about Himself: *In His Hand is all good* (Quran 3:26). And God’s giving may be in this world or in the world to come, and the choice is His. *And thus it is: Your Sustainer creates whatever He wills; and He chooses for mankind whatever is best for them* (Quran 26:68).

³⁶ Reported by al-Bukhari.

Twentieth Step

Certainty of faith and indifference about the world

If the light of deep faith shines on you, you will see the Hereafter before journeying to it, and you will see the trappings of this world vanishing before your eyes.

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

The journey to God in this life is much shorter than the journey to Him in the afterlife. One should not forget that death is a reality for all of us. All humans, believers and disbelievers, agree that death is the definite end of this life.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) warned us against striving only for this world. Again, this does not mean that we neglect our worldly affairs under the pretext that we are devoting our life to the Hereafter. What the Prophet meant is that we should not forget the Hereafter.

The Prophet is reported to have said: “Whoever wakes up and this world is his main concern, God will make him scattered and shattered, and he will feel a sense of panic and loss, and he will get nothing of this world except that which was already decreed for him. But whoever gets up and is mostly concerned about the Hereafter, God will cause him to feel focused and content, and will give him a feeling of being independent, and worldly gains will definitely come to him.”³⁷

When you open your eyes in the morning, ask yourself: What is the first thing that comes to my mind? What is my goal? Is it the Hereafter? Is it about God? If this is the case, God will grant you contentment and cause this worldly life to come to you despite your indifference to it.

By contrast, if you open your eyes thinking of so and so or such and such of worldly matters, even it is lawful, the Prophet says about this person that God will make him scattered and shattered. This

³⁷ Reported by al-Tirmidhi.

means that he will not be satisfied with whatever he gains and achieves. Rather he will always feel that he is still suffering poverty and need, and his greed will be endless.

The question is, how can we reach the level of thinking of the Hereafter? How can we always call it to our minds? The Shaykh links our remembrance of the Hereafter with our certainty of faith. He says that the more our certainty of faith increases, the more we will care about the Hereafter. He sums up this meaning in these words of wisdom: “If the light of deep faith shines on you, you will see the Hereafter before journeying to it, and you will see the trappings of this world vanishing before your eyes.”

The Shaykh links certainty of faith to the remembrance of the Hereafter. And how can we reach certainty of faith? The answer comes from the book of God: *and worship your Sustainer till certainty of faith comes to you* (Quran 15:99). The Prophet’s Companions experienced this feeling when they studied the Quran and worshipped God. It is reported that one of the Companions said: “When we sit with the Prophet and discuss matters of faith, it is as if we see heaven and hell with our eyes.”³⁸

Again, this does not mean that we isolate ourselves and renounce this worldly life. This is a wrong understanding that leads to an incorrect practice of the issue of remembering the Hereafter.

Indifference about this life does not mean renunciation of the world; it only means to be aware of the afterlife on a spiritual level. This is how balance can be achieved. *Exult not in your wealth, for, verily, God does not love those who exult [in things vain]!—Seek instead, by means of what God has granted you, the good of the life to come, without forgetting your own rightful share in this world; and do good as God has done good to you; and seek not to spread corruption on earth: for, verily, God does not love the spreaders of corruption!* (Quran 28:76–77).

Then, the Shaykh said, “and you will see the trappings of this world vanishing before your eyes.” This world is in a continuous state of vanishing. Hasan al-Basri once said: “Son of Adam! You are nothing but a number of days, with each day that passes a part of you is gone.”

³⁸ Reported by Ibn Maja.

The Shaykh says that if you have a deep belief in the Hereafter, you will see this world vanishing before your eyes. This will make you indifferent about it and its pleasures, and will draw you nearer to the Hereafter. We are much in need of this proper understanding because we easily forget the Hereafter and do not think about death.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) saw some Companions praising a man because of his good deeds. The Prophet asked them if he used to remember death. They said: We did not hear him mentioning death. Then the Prophet said: “Your friend is not there.” This means that he will not reach the high degrees of Paradise because he did not remember death, as remembering death makes one ready for the Hereafter.

Striving for this world only leads to loss in both lives, whereas remembering the Hereafter makes us successful in both lives. *If one desires the rewards of this world, [let him remember that] with God are the rewards of both this world and the life to come: and God is indeed All-Hearing, All-Seeing* (Quran 4:134).

There is no harm in caring for the pleasures of this life. But life should remain in our hands, not in our hearts. This is the correct definition of *zuhd* (indifference about this world), that is, to hold this world and its pleasures in your hand, but not let them into your heart.