

Ibn `Ataa's Words of Wisdom on Repentance and Hope

In his renowned book, *Al-Hikam* (Words of Wisdom), Sheikh Ahmad Ibn `Ataa'illah As-Sakandari offers profound insight:

“If you find yourself having less hope in God when you make a mistake, then realize you are only relying on your work, not on God’s Mercy.”

مِنْ غَلَامَةِ الْاِعْتِمَادِ عَلَى الْعَقْلِ، نُقْصَانُ الرَّجَاءِ عِنْدَ وُجُودِ الزَّلَلِ

When embarking on a spiritual journey toward God, one must ask: Where do I begin? What should I carry along on this path? Should I rely on the good deeds I've done as provisions for this journey?

Ibn `Ataa'illah's wisdom answers emphatically: No, you should not rely on your [good deeds](#). The journey to God begins with turning your heart fully to Him, trusting in Him alone, and placing your hope solely in His Mercy and Bounty.

Understanding God's Mercy

Some might wonder if receiving Allah's Mercy depends on their good deeds. But does Allah's Mercy cease when we falter? The Qur'an provides clarity:

“Now if Allah 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 the earth.” (An-Nahl 16:61)

Thus, it's not about earning or deserving Allah's Mercy, but about trusting in His infinite Mercy, despite our shortcomings. This is the foundation for a righteous path.

However, turning to Allah and hoping for His Mercy must be accompanied by sincere repentance. Just as a vessel must be emptied before it can be filled, our hearts must be cleared of sins and worldly desires to be filled with faith and divine light. The Sufi tradition sums this up: *Purity, then beauty, then light (al-takhalli thum al-tahalli thum al-tajalli)*.

The Role of Repentance

To begin this journey, one must repent from their shortcomings:

“And always, O you believers – all of you – turn unto God in repentance, so that you might attain to a happy state!” (An-Nur 24:31)

Repentance must be coupled with [hope in Allah](#). Ibn `Ataa'illah emphasizes the importance of hope in the process of repentance. Why is this hope so vital? He explains:

“If you find yourself having less hope in Allah when you make a mistake, then realize you are only relying on your work, not on Allah’s Mercy.”

This teaches us not to be self-righteous. Achieving virtue is not due to our efforts alone. A sign that one relies more on their deeds than on Allah’s Mercy is when hope diminishes after making a mistake. Hope should remain constant.

Conditions for True Repentance

Scholars identify four conditions for genuine repentance:

- **Remorse** for the mistake.
- **Cessation** of the wrongdoing, especially if it’s habitual.
- **Sincere Determination** not to repeat the mistake.
- **Restitution** of any wrongs done to others, such as returning what was taken unjustly or seeking forgiveness for slander.

True repentance requires meeting these conditions, with the understanding that Allah is Most Forgiving and Merciful.

The Balance of Hope and Awe

Sometimes, one may feel unworthy of Allah's grace due to their mistakes. This is a mistake in itself. Believing that one's sins are too great for Allah to forgive contradicts faith in His Mercy and can lead to despair:

“And who—other than those who have utterly lost their way—could ever abandon the hope of their Sustainer’s grace?” (Al Hijr 15:56)

Losing hope in Allah's Mercy indicates reliance on our limited selves rather than on His infinite Mercy. Yet, this does not mean abandoning righteous deeds. True reliance on Allah combines inner trust with outward action.

Ibn `Ataa'illah teaches that regardless of how severe one's mistakes may be, they should not diminish hope in Allah's Mercy. Sincere repentance will always be accepted by Allah, as the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said:

“A person who has repented of a sin sincerely is exactly like the person who has never sinned at all.” (Reported by [Ibn Majah](#))

Avoiding False Security

However, hope should not lead to complacency. Believing oneself immune to Allah's punishment regardless of actions is a dangerous illusion:

“But none feels secure from God’s deep devising save people who are lost.” (Al-`Araf 7:99)

True balance lies in maintaining both hope in Allah's Mercy and fear of His justice.

Conclusion: The Journey Begins with Hope

The first step on this spiritual journey is to reaffirm hope in Allah's Mercy and turn your heart toward Him. This marks the beginning of the path to divine proximity.

By Jasser Auda