

Al-Sakandari on the Purification of the Heart

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Abstract

The heart is known to be the king of the whole body, and the centre of emotions, faculties, as well as deeds, good or bad. No wonder, the spiritual health of the heart is essential for the health of the body. In Sufi literature, abundant materials are devoted to the heart treatment, its purification, along with spiritual enhancement. Ibn ‘Atā’ Allah al-Sakandari, one of outstanding Sufis, gave important ideas of how to remove diseases of the heart in order to restore its natural purity. Therefore, this article explores al-Sakandari’s treatment of the heart via his famous work, *Al-Hikam al-‘Ata’iyyah* (Aphorisms).

Keywords: Sakandari, *Al-Hikam al-‘Ata’iyyah*, heart, purification, disease.

Introduction

Islam places much emphasis on the pure condition of the heart. Because the heart is the essential part of the body. Highlighting the importance of the heart, the Prophet (pbuh) says, “Truly, in the breast of man is a lump of flesh, if sound then the whole body is sound, and if corrupt then the whole body is corrupt. It is indeed the heart” (Narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim. See Ibn al-Athir, 1969, vol. 10, p. 566). Also, the Prophet (pbuh) notes that God never looks at man’s appearance; He rather looks at the heart and actions (Narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim. See Ibn al-Athir, 1969, vol. 6, p. 523).

On the Day of Judgment, neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit, except one who comes to God with a sound heart (The Qur’ān, 26:88-89). The sound heart is understood to be free of defects and spiritual flaws. The ‘heart’ in Islamic tradition is the spiritual heart and not the physical organ, although the spiritual is closely connected to the physical one.

Muslim scholars have been addressing the spiritual diseases of the heart. In particular, Sufi writings on the heart is quite rich and complex. For them, the heart is the source of human truth since it is the centre for all emotions, and faculties, intellectual and spiritual. This chapter explores the ways of the purification of the heart as prescribed by the famous Sufi scholar, Ibn ‘Atā’ Allah al-Sakandari (d. 709 AH/ 1309 AD) in *Al-Hikam al-‘Ata’iyyah* (Aphorisms), one of the most popular and remarkable works on the literature of Sufism. The book of *al-Hikam* is a collection of maxims and wise sayings derived from the Qur’ān and Sunnah with a wonderful oratorical style.

Diseases of the heart

Some of al-Sakandari's *al-Hikam* that refer to the heart are two types: those referring to spiritual diseases of the heart and those giving a remedy.

There are three of al-Sakandari's *Hikam* that relate to some diseases of the heart:

In the first one al-Sakandari notes, "A sign of the heart's death is the absence of sadness over the acts of obedience you have neglected and the abandonment of regret over the mistakes you have made" (1989, p. 56). When a person does something good seeking God's obedience, he is filled with happiness and pleasure. And when he fails to do a good deed or, alternatively, indulges in an act of disobedience, he feels guilty and sad. If you are this sort of man, then your heart is alive. i.e., sensitive to the deeds of the body.

The Prophet (pbuh) says, "The one whose good deed pleases him and whose sin saddens him is indeed a believer" (Ibn al-Athir, 1969, vol. 6, p. 669). This is in contrast to the dead heart that remains largely passive and emotionless towards deeds done by the person. The death of the heart is a product of accumulated sins that have encompassed it. In the context, the Prophet (pbuh) warns, "If the son of Adam commits a sin, a black spot appears in the heart. If he seeks repentance and forgiveness, it is erased. But if he does not, it continues to grow until the whole heart becomes pitch black" (Ibn al-Athir, 1969, vol. 4, p. 425).

As for the other two sayings, al-Sakandari labels *al-Hawa*¹ (lust/caprice) and the lack of sincerity as terrible diseases that leave the heart corrupt (1989, p. 137). The former leads one astray from the path of Allah (The Qur'ān, 50: 26), and the latter is considered a little *shirk* (to associate partners with Allah) (Ibn Hanbal, 2001, vol, 39, p. 39).

The Remedy

Al-Sakandari's treatment or prescription intends to first cleanse the heart of ills and diseases, then fills it up with laudable traits and moral values.

1- Fear or Longing

¹ The Arabic term here for *al-hawa* is derived from the Arabic word that means 'to fall'. It is also related to the Arabic word for wind. "One's passion is like the wind, in that it comes, stirs up emotion, and then dies down. One cannot really see it, only its effect" Yusuf, (2012), p. 31. Further, *al-hawa* has the same root as *al-hawiyah* (Hell). "Perhaps the connection is that a person enslaved to his whims descends into the depths of depravity in this life, and, as a consequence, he faces perdition in the Hereafter" Yusuf, (2012), p. 31.

There are only two ways to give up the strong attachment to *shahwah* (whims and desires): terrifying fear of God's punishment or restless longing for His reward (al-Sakandari, 1989, p. 137). Following one's *shahwah*, deeply-rooted in the soul, drives a person away from attaining the truth and sound judgment. And to fight *shahwah* with merely the power of rational thinking and reasoning is not enough. It must be coupled with the power of passions that come from these two concepts.

Reward and punishment are Qur'ānic techniques to protect society from the temptations of one's desires and whims, by providing a warning to those who have gone off track and bringing good news to those who are on track. For example, "Know that God is severe in retribution and that God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful" (The Qur'ān, 5:98), and "Whoever does an atom's weight of good shall see it then, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil shall see it then also" (The Qur'ān, 99: 7-8).

2-Spiritual Seclusion ('*Uzlah/khalwah*)

Another cure for the heart disease is to engage yourself in contemplative solitude. Al-Sakandari says, "Nothing benefits the heart more than a spiritual solitude through which it enters the domain of contemplation" (al-Sakandari, 1989, p. 25).

We live today in the era of digital distractions and social media addiction as well as the pursuit of things that have to do with matter and pleasure. Such materialistic hectic life is bound to harden our heart. We need a break free from the deceptions of this alluring world, to attain a complete transformative spiritual experience. *Khalwah*, a period of intense meditation and reflection, awakens to the consciousness of the heart and cleanses it from spiritual diseases, like rancour, envy, arrogance, etc.

Contemplation is the journey of the heart through the creation of God, (al-Sakandari, 1989, p. 176), and the lantern (al-Sakandari, 1989, p. 177) by which the heart can distinguish truth from falsehood, right from the wrong, and discover the diseases of the soul as well as the vanities of the world. The contemplation of God's creation is one of the greatest forms of worship in Islam. The Qur'ān emphasizes the spiritual action of engaging in thought (The Qur'ān, 3: 190). In many Quranic verses, humans are directed to think, ponder, reflect, and observe (The Qur'ān, 38: 29; 47: 24).

3-Ascetic heart

Acts of an ascetic person are considered of extreme value even though they seem to be small in quantity. "No deed emanating from an ascetic heart is insignificant, and no deed emanating from a greedy heart bears significance/ fruit" (al-Sakandari, 1989, p. 53). The reason is that

these acts reflect a pure heart free from symptoms of spiritual flaws that emanate from the love of *dunya* (world). On the contrary, acts of someone whose heart is tainted by greed and thirst for the allure of *dunya* bear no real value even if they are great in quantity.

Further, al-Sakandari believes that once the heart becomes pure, and free from the love, veneration and glorification of anything rather than God, it is ready to be filled with Divine inspiration and secrets (1989, p. 138).

Conclusion

As people ensure to keep their stuff clean and tidy, like clothes, house, car, office, etc., they tend to leave their hearts dirty and stained. Allah created the heart in a state of purity and soundness. Our hearts are like a mirror that needs to be constantly cleaned. Otherwise, they cannot be in connection with the Creator, the source of light and purity.

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