The Path of Return

A Ten-Lesson Journey Through the *Kitab al-Hikam* of Ibn Ata'illah al-Sakandari

Adapted from the Malay syarah of Jauhari Che Wan

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Welcome to the Journey

More than seven centuries ago, in the city of Alexandria and amid the darkness that followed the fall of Baghdad, a jurist named Ibn Ata'illah al-Sakandari wept his way into a new life. From that turning came one of the most beloved works of Islamic spirituality, the *Kitab al-Hikam* — a book of aphorisms that has guided hearts back to Allah in every generation since.

The Path of Return distills the spiritual arc of that tradition into ten short lessons, adapted faithfully from a contemporary Malay commentary. This is not a book to rush. It is a path to walk. Each lesson is a single station on a sequential journey — from the first breath of repentance to the summit of servanthood — and the stations are arranged in order for a reason. Begin at the beginning, and let one lesson settle before you move to the next.

How to use this course

- Read one lesson per sitting, unhurried. Each takes only a few minutes.
- Sit with the opening *hikmah* (the Arabic aphorism) before reading the commentary.
- End every lesson with the two questions under *Reflect & Practise*: one to turn over in the heart, one to act upon. The course lives in the answering, not merely the reading.
- Return to earlier lessons often. This is a path of return in more ways than one.

The ten stations

1. Beginning Again — repentance (*tawbah*)
2. Trusting the Decree — reliance and contentment (*tawakkul*, *ridha*)
3. Remembrance and Nearness — *dhikr*
4. The Signs of True Faith — *iman*, *tawfiq* and *istidraj*
5. Adab Before Allah and the Prophet ﷺ
6. Patience and Gratitude — *sabr* and *shukr*
7. Knowing the Self, Knowing God — *ma'rifat al-nafs*
8. Love and Divine Longing — *mahabbah* and *shawq*
9. Fana' and Baqa'
10. The Summit of Servanthood — *'ubudiyyah*

May Allah make this a journey of light from its radiant beginning to its radiant end.

Lesson 1 — Beginning Again

> من علامات الاعتماد على العمل نقصان الرجاء عند وجود الزلل
> *Among the signs of relying on one's deeds is the diminishing of hope when a fault occurs.*
> *— Ibn Ata'illah, Kitab al-Hikam, Hikmah 5*

The First Breath of Return

Ibn Ata'illah did not place repentance at the beginning of *Kitab al-Hikam*. Yet every hikmah quietly invites the reader to return. Repentance is not a separate chapter of life, reserved for a later time. It is the first breath, the earliest step, and the key that opens the other doors of mercy.

The hikmah points to a subtle disease of the heart. When we sin, our hope in Allah begins to shrink. This happens because we have secretly relied on our deeds, imagining that our goodness was what saved us. When our deeds fail, our confidence collapses with them.

But the one who truly trusts Allah responds differently. When he falls, he does not surrender to despair. He rises with greater hope, knowing that it is Allah who receives him, not his deeds.

True repentance is returning to Allah not because we are already clean, but because we know that He alone can cleanse us. It is not the act of the already-pure. It is the weeping of one who has seen the truth of his own condition and still turns toward divine mercy.

Ibn Ata'illah's First Repentance

Ibn Ata'illah al-Sakandari was born in Alexandria in 658 AH / 1259 CE, four years after Hulagu's Mongols destroyed Baghdad. Libraries had been burned, scholars killed, and the Tigris was said to run black with ink and red with blood. Darkness covered the Muslim world.

In Alexandria, however, a child was born who would become a lamp.

In his early life, Ibn Ata'illah was a strict jurist. He was even harsh toward the Sufis, whose practices seemed strange to him. He later met Shaykh Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi, the heir of Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili and a leading spiritual guide of his time.

Ibn Ata'illah came intending to debate and refute the Sufis. Al-Mursi did not argue. He simply said, "My son, if you wish to know the truth, be silent and listen to your heart."

Those words pierced him. Ibn Ata'illah felt the barrenness of knowledge without spiritual taste. He wept, and from that weeping came his first repentance.

Repentance is a journey of awakening, remorse, resolve, and steadfastness. The teachers describe three stations:

1. **Tawbat al-'Awwam** — leaving major sins out of fear of punishment.
2. **Tawbat al-Khawas** — leaving minor sins and doubtful matters out of shame before Allah.
3. **Tawbat al-Khawas al-Khawas** — leaving everything that distracts the heart from Allah, even what is otherwise permitted.

Ibn Ata'illah passed through these levels: from harshness toward the Sufis, to attachment to fame as a jurist, and finally toward freedom from everything that veiled him from Allah. From this last repentance, *Kitab al-Hikam* was born.

Three Stories of Return

A man once told Ibn Ata'illah that he had sinned greatly and felt too vile to repent. Ibn Ata'illah smiled and warned him that feeling too vile to repent was itself a greater danger: despair of Allah's mercy. Iblis did not despair because Allah's mercy was unavailable; he was too arrogant to ask for forgiveness. The man wept and repented.

When al-Mursi was asked how to repent from past sins, he advised, "Do not count your sins one by one. Remember the One Allah. When your heart is full of Allah, the sins fall away like dry leaves in the wind." Repentance is therefore a turning of attention away from sin and toward Allah. This is the secret of *dhikr*.

Fudhail bin Iyad was once a feared highway robber who led seventy bandits between Abiward and Sarakhs. One night, while climbing a wall to rob a house, he heard a recitation from the verse, "Has the time not come for the believers that their hearts be humbled to the remembrance of Allah?"

The words struck him like lightning. Tears flowed from eyes that had been dry for decades. He climbed down, not to commit another robbery, but to find the way home. He sought a scholar in Kufa, confessed his crimes, and abandoned his life of violence. He later became a great ascetic and imam of the Sufis, yet he wept each night, fearing that his repentance was not sincere. His story teaches that no sin is too great for forgiveness.

Malik bin Dinar was a hardened wine-drinker and reveller. One day, drunk in the marketplace, he laughed when an old woman's water-jug shattered. She cried out that if he did not repent, Allah would shatter his life as the jug had shattered. Her words cut through him. At home, he smashed his own wine cup, blood and tears mixing, and vowed never to touch wine again.

At the scholars' circle, he called himself "the vile wine-drinker." A scholar welcomed him, saying that Allah rejoices more at a servant's repentance than a traveller who loses his camel in the desert and then finds it again. Malik changed his life completely, praying through the night and sleeping on bare ground. His story teaches that repentance requires total change.

Bishr al-Hafi was once a wealthy young man in Baghdad, dressed in silk and surrounded by luxury. After giving money to a weeping poor man, he dreamed of a radiant figure saying that because he had helped Allah's poor servant, Allah wished to help him. Bishr gave away his silk and furniture, moved into a hut, wore coarse clothing, walked barefoot, and worked for only enough food for one day.

When Harun al-Rashid offered him money, Bishr refused. He had repented from luxury and did not want to return to that former lowliness. His life teaches that *zuhd*, or detachment, can be the fruit of sincere repentance. Luxury may become a thick veil between the heart and Allah.

The Gift of Being Called Back

Repentance itself is a gift. When the desire to repent awakens in you, receive it with gratitude. It is a sign that Allah has not abandoned you, and that His love is still drawing you home.

The journey unfolds through stations: awakening, repentance, returning, steadfastness, and love. Its beginning may be a single tear, a moment of shame, or the quiet recognition that your heart has wandered.

As Ibn Ata'illah teaches, whoever's beginning is radiant, his end is radiant too.

Reflect & Practise

1. **Reflective:** When you fall into sin or weakness, does your hope in Allah diminish because you have been relying on your own deeds?
2. **Practical spiritual:** What one attachment, habit, or distraction can you turn away from today as a concrete act of returning to Allah?

Lesson 2 — Trusting the Decree

> لا يكن تأخر أمد العطاء مع الإلحاح في الدعاء موجبا ليأسك، فهو ضمن لك الإجابة فيما يختاره لك لا فيما تختاره لنفسك، وفي الوقت الذي يريد لا في الوقت الذي تريد
>
> ***"Do not let the delay of a gift, despite persistent supplication, cause you to despair — for He has guaranteed you a response in what He chooses for you, not what you choose for yourself, and at the time He wills, not the time you will."***
>
> *— Ibn Ata'illah*

We often measure an answered prayer by whether life gives us what we requested. We ask for a particular job, healing, marriage, relief, or opportunity, and when it does not arrive, we may feel forgotten. Yet Ibn Ata'illah teaches that Allah's response is guaranteed—not necessarily in the form we choose, or at the moment we desire.

This is the heart of **tawakkul**: placing the heart wholly upon Allah after making every sincere effort.

Tawakkul is not laziness. It is not waiting for fish to leap into your mouth. The bird leaves its nest hungry at dawn, searches for food, and returns full at dusk. The farmer plows, sows, and waters the earth, then entrusts the growth to Allah. He would go mad if he dug up the seed every day to see whether it had begun to grow.

We, too, must act without trying to control the unseen. We study carefully, work honestly, seek treatment, make responsible plans, and take the means available to us. Then we release the outcome to the One who governs it. Ibn Ata'illah himself lived through drought, political instability, and the imprisonment of scholars, yet he did not stop teaching or writing. Trust did not remove his responsibility; it gave him the strength to continue.

A prayer that appears delayed or unanswered is still held within Allah's wisdom. The job that was denied may have drawn you away from a path that would have weakened your faith. A healing that was delayed may have brought you nearer through patience. A spouse who did not come at the expected time may be replaced by someone better, at a time that is better for you.

The heart must not become like a child crying for the candy withheld by a mother who knows it will cause harm, while she offers better fruit instead. What looks like deprivation may be protection. What feels like delay may be preparation. What seems like an unanswered prayer may be an answer whose meaning has not yet unfolded.

The highest expression of tawakkul is **ridha**: contentment with Allah's decree. Ridha does not mean the absence of pain. The Prophet ﷺ wept when his son Ibrahim died. Grief can remain in the heart without becoming rebellion against Allah.

Ibn Ata'illah's counsel is: **Do not ask Allah to take you out of a condition; ask Him to make you grateful within it.** Gratitude in hardship can be greater than gratitude in ease, because it reveals a heart that recognises Allah even when it cannot yet understand His wisdom.

Consider Prophet Ibrahim when he was cast into the fire. Jibril offered him help, but Ibrahim replied that he needed nothing from him; Allah knew his state. He placed his trust in Allah, who is sufficient and the best of guardians. Allah then commanded the fire to be cool and safe for Ibrahim, and the place of punishment became like a cool garden. Tawakkul did not prevent the trial, but Allah transformed its effect.

When Prophet Musa stood at the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army behind him and the sea before him, the people despaired. Musa answered, "Never! My Lord is with me; He will guide me." The sea parted. When there appears to be no way forward, Allah can open a way where none was visible.

Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal showed the strength of ridha during the Mihna, the ordeal concerning the created Qur'an. He was imprisoned and flogged until he bled, yet he repeated, "La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah"—there is no power and no strength except through Allah—and remained content with Allah's decree. He did not surrender his truth through fear. Ridha was not weak resignation; it was immense inner strength.

The same teaching appears in the story of a poor Shadhili wali and the counsel associated with Abu Yazid al-Bustami. When a disciple wept after losing all his wealth, the shaykh reminded him that two things had not vanished: faith and ridha. Content with poverty, he was richer than those possessing gold and silver. When a wealthy merchant offered gold to the barefoot wali, he refused, fearing that his heart would become tied to the world. True wealth is a tranquil heart, not possessions.

We live in an impatient age: angry at slow internet, anxious over unanswered messages, and despairing when prayer does not seem to bring immediate change. Tawakkul retrains the heart in **sabr**, patient steadfastness. After fastening your seatbelt and driving carefully, entrust the rest to Allah. After studying hard, release your fear of the examination. Keep the heart connected through abundant dhikr, until contentment becomes more natural.

"Whoever trusts in Allah, He will suffice him." — Tirmidhi

Reflect & Practise

1. Where in your life are you struggling to accept Allah's timing or the form of His response?
2. What sincere effort will you make today, followed by a conscious act of entrusting the outcome to Allah?

Lesson 3 — Remembrance and Nearness

> من علامات الذكر الصادق أن يغيب العبد عن شهود غير المذكور
> *"Among the signs of true remembrance is that the servant becomes absent from witnessing anything other than the One Remembered." — Ibn Ata'illah*

Dhikr is often understood as the tongue naming Allah. This is a blessed beginning, but it is not the whole of remembrance. Even a child in the surau can repeat Allah's name. True dhikr reaches further: it slowly gathers the heart until the heart is no longer tied or attached to anything besides Allah.

To be "absent" from witnessing other-than-Him does not mean that we stop seeing the world. It does not mean becoming unconscious of our surroundings or abandoning our responsibilities. It means that the heart no longer sees anything as independent of Allah. Everything is received as coming from Him and returning to Him.

You may sit at a computer finishing a report, answering messages, or carrying out your daily work while your heart remains tethered to Allah. You work for Him, and therefore the work is not witnessed as an independent thing. Your hands are occupied with the task, but your heart knows that strength, ability, provision, and every result belong to Allah.

In the Shadhili path, dhikr is the pulse of spiritual life:

> *"The life of the heart is dhikr, as the life of the fish is water."*

Take a fish from the water and it dies. In the same way, a heart without remembrance dies in heedlessness, even while the body remains busy and outwardly active. The Malay proverb *bagai ikan lupa akan air*—like a fish forgetting the water—describes our condition. We live within Allah's mercy at every moment, yet we forget the very mercy that surrounds us. Dhikr reminds us that we are always in that "water."

Shaykh Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi, the teacher of Ibn Ata'illah, embodied this remembrance. He would spend nights in the corner of the mosque in Alexandria repeating Allah's name. At times he would not eat for days, yet his face shone like a full moon. When asked about this, he said, "I am not hungry because I am always full with dhikr." Ibn Ata'illah studied under him for twelve years.

Al-Mursi also taught:

> *"Dhikr is a fire that burns the heart's impurities; when it blazes, the bad traits are consumed and only light remains."*

This fire does not merely make the tongue busy. It transforms the person who remembers. Greed, heedlessness, envy, and attachment are gradually exposed and consumed. What remains is greater clarity and light.

The merchant Shaykh Ahmad al-Bazzaz of Alexandria showed that remembrance can live within ordinary work. He was a wealthy cloth-trader whose lips never stopped making dhikr while he served his customers. When asked how he could trade and remember Allah at the same time, he explained that dhikr was a help, not a distraction. It kept his heart calm and his mind clear. Because he knew that provision came from Allah, not from customers, he was not easily deceived by buyers and was not overcome by greed for profit.

This is the balance of the spiritual path: keep the world in your hand, not in your heart.

The Shadhili tradition describes three levels of dhikr. The first is dhikr of the tongue. This is the beginning, like a seed planted in the earth. The tongue repeats Allah's name, even when the heart is still distracted. The second is dhikr of the heart, when the remembrance becomes inwardly felt and no voice is needed. The heart begins to sense Allah's presence throughout its movements.

The third is dhikr of the *sirr*, the secret inward centre. At this depth, the one remembering is no longer aware that he is remembering. Dhikr has become part of his nature, like breathing. Abu Bakr al-Siddiq is presented as an exemplar of this kind of remembrance: dhikr had soaked into his whole being.

Imam al-Ghazali described dhikr as polishing the rusted mirror of the heart. A mirror covered in rust cannot reflect clearly. Likewise, a heart covered by heedlessness cannot recognise the signs of Allah's nearness. Remembrance does not bring Allah closer in distance; it clears what prevents us from recognising that He is already near.

The time of *sahur*, the last third of the night, carries a special virtue for remembrance and seeking forgiveness. The Qur'an praises those who, at the time of sahur, seek forgiveness: "And at the time of sahur they seek forgiveness" (al-Dhariyat 18). In the quiet of that hour, the heart may become more receptive, less occupied by the noise of the world.

Yet remembrance must be sincere. There is a warning against "the dhikr of the hypocrite": the tongue moves while the heart remains far away. The aim is not to collect the appearance of remembrance, but to let remembrance enter us. A little dhikr done constantly is better than much dhikr that is repeatedly interrupted.

Dhikr is like a lamp in a dark room. It does not remove the room or make the world disappear. It gives light, allowing the heart to see Allah in all things.

Reflect & Practise

1. Where do you most often treat something in your life as though it were independent of Allah, rather than as something coming from Him and returning to Him?
2. What small, steady practice of dhikr can you keep—especially at sahur—so that remembrance becomes more constant and begins to accompany your daily work?

Lesson 4 — The Signs of True Faith

> إذا أراد الله بعبد خيرا، فتح له باب التوفيق وأغلق عنه باب الاستدراج
> *"When Allah wills good for a servant, He opens for him the door of tawfiq (divine enabling toward obedience) and closes upon him the door of istidraj (being gradually lured deeper into heedlessness while thinking all is well)."*
> *— Ibn Ata'illah*

True faith, or *iman*, is more than words spoken by the lips. It is a conviction that settles into the heart, then gradually appears in a person's character, conduct, and response to life. Faith is known not only by what we claim to believe, but by what remains within us when we are tested.

The path of return teaches us to recognise two different doors: *tawfiq* and *istidraj*.

Tawfiq is Allah's enabling grace—the success to obey Him, remember Him, and turn towards Him. It may arrive through ease, when blessings awaken gratitude. It may also arrive through hardship, when difficulty strips away false reliance and draws the heart nearer to Allah. In both comfort and pain, the servant is being guided back to Him.

The true sign that Allah wills good for you is therefore not simply that life becomes comfortable. It is that every state turns your heart towards Allah. Ease makes you thankful. Hardship makes you patient and dependent upon Him. Success increases your humility rather than your pride. Even a trial becomes a means of returning.

Istidraj is different. It is when blessings continue to flow over a heedless person, gradually lulling the heart deeper into forgetfulness. Everything may appear well outwardly, while inwardly the person is moving further from Allah. The blessing becomes a hidden punishment because it strengthens carelessness rather than gratitude, and comfort becomes a veil rather than a bridge.

This is why comfort alone cannot be used as proof that Allah is pleased with us. Nor can difficulty alone be taken as a sign of rejection. The question is not merely, "What is happening to me?" The deeper question is, "Where is this state taking my heart?"

Verified and realised faith—*iman tahqiq*—is faith that has entered the character. It is cultivated through knowledge, through the companionship of sincere people, through *dhikr*, and through the trials that reveal what truly lives within us. Faith becomes firm when it is practised, remembered, and tested.

Consider Abu Bakr as-Siddiq at the time of the Isra' and Mi'raj. When the Quraysh mocked the Prophet's account of the night journey, Abu Bakr did not hesitate. He said, "If he said it, then it is true." His faith did not wait for the approval of others or demand that certainty first be made comfortable. His immediate affirmation earned him the title *as-Siddiq*, the truthful and confirming one.

Consider Bilal bin Rabah, enslaved and tortured upon the burning sand, with a rock placed upon his chest. His lips repeated only, "Ahad, Ahad"—"One, One." His freedom was not founded upon wealth or worldly power, but upon the strength of faith that remained firm under suffering.

Consider Khabbab bin al-Aratt, a young believer branded and burned with fire for his faith. His back was scarred, yet he did not recant. And consider Sumayyah bint Khayyat, an elderly woman who became the first martyr in Islam because she refused to abandon her faith.

These believers show us that *iman* is not merely professed in words. It is proven in the fire of trial. Their circumstances were severe, but their hearts were not surrendered to despair or forgetfulness. Their trials became places where faith was made visible.

The lesson is not that a believer seeks hardship. Rather, it is that a believer learns to recognise Allah's guidance in every state. When ease comes, let it open the door of gratitude and obedience. When hardship comes, let it open the door of dependence and remembrance. The servant who is being drawn towards Allah is not necessarily the one with the easiest life, but the one whose life—whatever its condition—keeps returning the heart to Him.

Reflect & Practise

1. When you look at your present ease or difficulty, how is it shaping your relationship with Allah?
2. What is one act of knowledge, sincere companionship, *dhikr*, or obedience you can practise today to strengthen your faith?

Lesson 5 — Adab Before Allah and the Prophet

> إذا فتح لك بابا من العبودية فلا تطلب غيره، فإنه لا يفتح لك بابا إلا ليكرمك
> *"If He opens for you a door of servanthood, do not seek another, for He opens no door for you except to honour you." — Ibn Ata'illah*

Adab is refined courtesy before Allah: reverence in the heart, humility in conduct, and care in how one stands before what is sacred. It is not merely outward politeness. It is the inward awareness that Allah is greater, wiser, and more deserving of honour than anything else.

The source of adab is *ma'rifah*, knowledge of Allah. The more deeply a servant knows his Lord, the more carefully he behaves before Him. Knowledge that does not produce humility has not yet reached the heart. When a servant recognises Allah's majesty and mercy, he becomes less demanding, less hurried, and less eager to place himself at the centre.

This is the meaning carried by Ibn Ata'illah's wisdom. Allah opens different doors of servanthood for different people. One person is drawn into regular prayer. Another is given strength for fasting. Another finds a path in serving people. Another is opened to seeking knowledge. These doors may not look alike, but each is a gift from Allah.

The servant is therefore taught to be content with the door Allah has opened for him. He should not despise his own path while longing for the path of another. The form of worship given to someone else may not be the form through which Allah is caring for him. To restlessly chase another station can become a subtle form of bad adab, as though Allah's choice is not good enough.

The honour is not only in what the servant may receive through worship. The honour is already present in being allowed to worship at all. The invitation to serve Allah is a greater gift than anything that service might obtain. To stand at His door, to be given the desire to pray, to be enabled to fast, to be allowed to serve, or to be granted the longing to learn—this is itself a sign of divine care.

Ibn Ata'illah's adab with his teacher, Shaykh Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi, gives this teaching a living form. He approached his teacher with humility, listened in silence, and never placed himself above the shaykh. He served with reverence rather than treating knowledge as something to be seized or displayed.

This kind of adab toward a teacher trains the soul for adab toward Allah. A person who cannot listen humbly to a teacher may find it difficult to receive guidance from his Lord. A

person who is always eager to assert himself may struggle to surrender to divine wisdom. Through humility, listening, and service, the servant learns to leave behind the demand to control everything.

Adab also shapes our relationship with the Prophet ﷺ. Love for him is shown by following his Sunnah carefully, sending salawat upon him, lowering the voice in his presence, and not placing one's own opinion above his guidance. The Companions showed this reverence through their conduct. Their love was not merely a feeling; it appeared in obedience, attentiveness, and restraint.

To have adab with the Prophet ﷺ is to recognise the honour of the guidance he brought. It is to let his example refine the way we speak, worship, decide, and respond. The heart that loves him does not treat his Sunnah as an ornament. It receives it with respect.

Adab is also required within worship itself. Prayer should not be approached as a task to rush through, but as a standing before the King. The servant gathers the heart, settles the body, and remembers before Whom he is standing. Even the ability to pray is received with gratitude. Worship is not an achievement by which we claim superiority; it is a mercy by which Allah has allowed us to turn toward Him.

This attitude changes the whole experience of devotion. The servant does not say inwardly, "I am doing something great for Allah." Rather, he recognises that Allah has granted him the ability, time, strength, and invitation to worship. The grateful heart sees every act of servanthood as an honour.

The path of return is therefore not a race toward someone else's station. It is a deepening of courtesy in the station Allah has already given you. Receive your door with gratitude. Stand before Allah with presence. Follow the Prophet ﷺ with love. Let knowledge become humility, and let worship become a quiet recognition that being welcomed to His door is already a priceless gift.

Reflect & Practise

1. Which door of servanthood has Allah opened for you, and how might you recognise it as an honour rather than compare it with another person's path?
2. Before your next prayer, pause in gratitude for the ability to worship and enter it slowly as though standing before the King.

Lesson 6 — Patience and Gratitude

> **الصبر والشكر هما ميزان الإيمان، فبالصبر تثبت القدم، وبالشكر تزكو النعمة، وهما كالجناحين للطائر لا يستقيم طيرانه إلا بهما**
>
> *"Patience and gratitude are the balance of faith; by patience the foot stands firm, by gratitude the blessing grows pure; they are like the two wings of a bird, whose flight is not upright except with both."*
> *— Ibn Ata'illah*

Faith is held steady by two qualities: **sabr**, or patience, and **shukr**, or gratitude. They are like the two wings of a bird. With only one wing, a bird cannot fly straight. In the same way, a servant cannot travel upright to Allah through patience alone or gratitude alone.

Patience gives firmness when life becomes difficult. It keeps the foot from slipping when the road is steep, painful, or uncertain. Gratitude purifies blessing and allows it to increase. It teaches the heart to recognise that every gift comes from Allah, rather than allowing comfort to produce pride or heedlessness.

The mature believer practises patience in hardship and gratitude in ease. But there is a deeper balance still: gratitude within hardship, and patient restraint within ease. A trial may contain hidden gifts, while a blessing may require discipline and humility. The servant is therefore called to remain turned towards Allah in every condition.

The life of Prophet Ayyub shows the dignity of patience. He endured years of illness, the loss of wealth, and the loss of his children. Yet he remained patient without complaint against his Lord. His prayer was not a demand, but a humble turning:

> *"Harm has touched me, and You are the Most Merciful."*

His words reveal a heart that acknowledged pain without losing trust. He recognised his affliction, but he recognised Allah's mercy even more deeply. Patience did not mean that suffering was unreal. It meant that suffering did not sever his relationship with Allah.

Prophet Yusuf also carried patience through changing circumstances. He endured the darkness of the well and the confinement of prison. Neither place defined his faith. Later, when he reached the height of power in Egypt, he responded with gratitude rather than arrogance. He did not treat success as proof of his own greatness. He attributed every opening and every honour to Allah.

In this, Yusuf teaches that patience is needed not only when we are deprived, but also when we are given authority, comfort, and success. Ease can test the heart just as hardship does. A person may need patience to restrain pride, selfishness, and forgetfulness when blessings arrive.

Prophet Ya'qub shows another form of patience. He grieved deeply for Yusuf, and his tears were real. Yet his sorrow did not become despair. He held to what is called **sabrun jamil**, beautiful patience: a patience that carries pain without turning away from Allah. His heart was wounded, but his hope in Allah remained alive.

Prophet Sulayman shows the soul of gratitude. When he saw the blessings placed before him, he said:

> *"This is from the bounty of my Lord, to test whether I am grateful or ungrateful."*

He understood that blessing is also a test. Gratitude is not merely saying thank you with the tongue. It is recognising the Giver, receiving the gift with humility, and allowing the blessing to remain pure. When gratitude is present, comfort does not become ownership, and success does not become arrogance.

The chapter also recalls a blind wali who remained grateful even after losing his sight. His gratitude was not dependent upon possessing every comfort. It came from knowing Allah and recognising His gifts beyond what the eye can see. Likewise, a poor man may be truly rich through gratitude. Contentment is the real wealth, because the grateful heart is not made poor by lacking what others possess.

Patience and gratitude therefore meet in the heart that remains with Allah. Patience refines the servant through difficulty, like gold purified in heat. Gratitude keeps blessing from becoming a veil. Together, they steady the journey through both loss and abundance.

When hardship comes, patience teaches the servant to remain firm. When ease comes, gratitude teaches the servant to remain humble. And when both qualities are joined, they become the two wings that carry the servant towards Allah.

Reflect & Practise

1. **Reflective:** Which condition is more difficult for your heart—to remain patient in hardship or grateful in ease—and what does that reveal about your relationship with Allah?

2. **Practical spiritual:** In the coming week, how will you practise patience in one difficulty and gratitude for one blessing, remembering that both are tests and invitations to return to Allah?

Lesson 7 — Knowing the Self, Knowing God

> **أَخْرِجْ من قلبك كل موجود دوني، فإن المحبوب لا يرضى بالمشاركة**
> *"Remove from your heart everything that exists besides Me, for the Beloved does not accept partnership." — Ibn Ata'illah*

The path to knowing Allah begins with a discovery that is both intimate and easily neglected: we do not truly know ourselves.

We may know many facts about the world. We may understand its systems, collect information, study religious law, or become skilled in our work. Yet beneath all this knowledge lies the forgotten secret of the self — the *nafs*. What moves the heart? What does it cling to? What does it fear losing? What does it quietly seek from people?

The maxim says: *man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu* — "Whoever knows himself knows his Lord." This does not mean that the self is divine. Rather, when a person sees the truth of his own condition, he begins to recognise the truth of his Lord. He sees his poverty, and glimpses Allah's richness. He sees his dependence, and recognises Allah's power. He sees his helplessness, and is led toward the One who is never helpless.

The self becomes a mirror. It reflects our need, while Allah is free of need. It reveals our weakness, while Allah is strong. It exposes how quickly we change, while Allah remains perfect and constant. To know the self honestly is therefore to be led beyond the self.

Ibn Ata'illah's own journey shows that religious learning, though noble and necessary, is not the same as knowing God. He began as a strict jurist, a *faqih*, with a mind shaped by knowledge and discipline. His learning was full, but his heart remained empty. He knew the outward forms, yet he had not fully turned inward to confront the state of his heart.

Then he encountered al-Mursi, who directed him toward the deeper work of the spiritual path. This turning inward did not reject knowledge. It revealed its purpose. Learning must lead to transformation; otherwise, a person may accumulate understanding while remaining distant from the One he seeks to know.

This is the meaning of the hikmah: "Remove from your heart everything that exists besides Me." It does not command us to abandon the world with our hands. We still work, care for others, fulfil responsibilities, and use what Allah has placed in our lives. The matter concerns the heart.

The hands may hold possessions while the heart remains free of them. A person may have wealth without worshipping wealth, receive praise without living for praise, and hold a position without believing that status gives true worth. The world becomes a trust, not a rival. What must be removed is attachment — the belief that anything besides Allah can complete us, secure us, or define us.

The Beloved does not accept partnership. The heart cannot be wholly turned toward Allah while sharing its throne with idols of wealth, status, ego, or the love of being admired. These idols may be subtle. They may hide beneath good actions, religious language, or respectable ambitions. Yet whatever is loved more than Allah, feared more than Allah, or relied upon instead of Allah can become a rival within the heart.

The first movement is called *takhliyah*: emptying. We empty the heart of its rivals. This is not accomplished in a single moment. It is a patient process of noticing what has taken Allah's place, admitting our attachment, and returning again and again. Once the heart is emptied, it can be adorned and filled — *tahliyah* — with remembrance, sincerity, love, trust, and nearness to Allah.

The chapter recounts the story of a servant or disciple who emptied his heart of everything until only Allah remained. What he discovered was a nearness that possessions could never provide. The heart had been crowded with substitutes, but none could satisfy its deepest longing. When those substitutes were released, the servant found that what he had been seeking was not found in having more, but in belonging wholly to Allah.

This purification unfolds through stages of the *nafs*. At first is *al-nafs al-ammarah*, the commanding self — the self that urges us toward heedlessness, desire, pride, and attachment. Then comes *al-nafs al-lawwamah*, the self-reproaching self, which awakens to its failures and begins to hold itself accountable. Finally comes *al-nafs al-mutma'innah*, the tranquil self — the self purified enough to rest in Allah, at peace with Him and surrendered to His care.

The journey is not about becoming impressed with our spiritual progress. It is about becoming truthful. We recognise our need, confront our attachments, and allow Allah to purify what we cannot purify by our own strength.

Knowing our helplessness is not the end of the path. It is the doorway to knowing the Beloved. When the self stops claiming independence, the heart begins to recognise its Lord. When the heart is no longer crowded by rivals, it becomes capable of receiving the nearness it was created for.

Reflect & Practise

1. **Reflective:** What attachment — wealth, status, ego, praise, or another rival — most often competes with Allah for the throne of your heart?
2. **Practical spiritual:** What is one specific act of *takhliyah* you can practise today to loosen that attachment and return your heart to Allah?

Lesson 8 — Love and Divine Longing

> المحبة أن تحب ما يحبه المحبوب، وتكره ما يكرهه المحبوب، وتفنى في مراده عن مرادك، وتغيب في شهوده عن شهودك
>
> *"Love is that you love what the Beloved loves, and hate what the Beloved hates, and vanish in His will from your own will, and become absent in His witnessing from your own witnessing."*
>
> *— Ibn Ata'illah*

Divine love, or *mahabbah*, is not simply a powerful feeling directed towards Allah. It is a transformation of the whole self. In worldly love, we may desire the beloved while still remaining centred on our own needs, hopes, and expectations. But love of Allah gradually turns the heart away from itself. It teaches us to love what He loves, to dislike what He dislikes, and to surrender our will to His.

This is why divine love is described as self-effacing. Your desires begin to dissolve into His desire. Your will begins to rest within His will. The more deeply love takes root, the less the self insists on being the centre. Love is not a feeling you consume for comfort. It is a path that consumes you.

The chapter also teaches:

> الشوق إلى الله نار تحرق الحجاب بينك وبينه، فإذا اشتعلت في القلب لم يبق فيه غير الله
>
> *"Longing for Allah is a fire that burns the veil between you and Him; when it blazes in the heart, nothing remains in it but Allah."*

Longing, or *shawq*, is the fire of the heart's movement towards Allah. It burns through the veils that stand between the servant and the Beloved, especially the veils of ego, attachment, and forgetfulness. When longing becomes alive, the heart is no longer satisfied with substitutes. It seeks Allah Himself.

Rabi'ah al-Adawiyyah stands as a lamp of this love. She did not worship Allah merely from fear of Hell or hope of Paradise, but from pure love for Him. Her famous prayer expresses this complete freedom from every substitute: if she worshipped Him from fear of Hell, she asked that she be burned in it; if she worshipped Him from hope of Paradise, she asked to be excluded from it; but if she worshipped Him for His own sake, she asked that His eternal beauty not be withheld from her. Her love was directed beyond reward and punishment, towards Allah Himself.

The longing of Prophet Dawud is also remembered in this spirit. His weeping and lament in the depth of night arose from yearning for Allah. His tears were not empty sorrow. They were the expression of a heart drawn towards its Lord, a heart unable to remain content with distance.

Ibn al-Farid, known as "the sultan of lovers," spoke of this love in the language of the soul. His poetry carried the ache, sweetness, and intensity of longing for the Divine. Rumi and Shams of Tabriz likewise represent a love that burns away the veil of the self. Their story points to the way love can become a fire: not a fire that destroys the heart, but one that consumes the false claim of separateness.

The chapter also honours Hamka and his love for the knowledge of Allah. This reminds us that love is not separated from knowing. The heart longs for the One it comes to recognise, and knowledge deepens longing. To seek knowledge of Allah is itself an expression of love when the search is not for pride or argument, but for nearness.

In this journey, the language of *fana'* and *baqa'* becomes important. *Fana'* is vanishing in the Beloved: the weakening of the ego's demands, claims, and separateness before Allah. It is not the erasure of responsibility or human existence. It is the fading of self-centredness. Then comes *baqa'*, subsisting through Him: living, acting, and serving by the light of the Beloved rather than by the authority of the ego.

Mahabbah is therefore a journey. It begins with turning towards Allah and grows through surrender. At every stage, the heart is invited to release another attachment, another insistence, another substitute. Its summit is to see Allah with the heart: to recognise His nearness, majesty, beauty, and sustaining presence inwardly.

Such longing gives life. It awakens the heart from heedlessness and makes worship more than habit. It turns remembrance into intimacy, surrender into peace, and knowledge into love. The heart that longs for Allah is not lifeless or empty. It is burning with direction. Its fire removes what obscures the Beloved until nothing is loved more than Him.

Reflect & Practise

1. Where do you notice your own desires resisting what you understand Allah loves, and what might it mean to surrender that resistance?
2. What simple spiritual practice will you undertake today to keep your heart turned towards Allah with longing?

Lesson 9 — Fana’ and Baqa’

> مِنْ عَلَامَاتِ الْفَنَاءِ أَنْ لَا تَرَى مَعَ اللهِ سِوَاهُ، وَمِنْ عَلَامَاتِ الْبَقَاءِ أَنْ تَرَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ بِهِ لَا بِغَيْرِهِ
>
> *“Among the signs of fana’ (annihilation) is that you see nothing alongside Allah; and among the signs of baqa’ (subsistence) is that you see everything by Him, not by other than Him.”*
>
> *— Ibn Ata’illah*

The words *fana’* and *baqa’* describe a movement of the heart: first, the fading of the false self; then, the life of the servant through the True.

Fana’ does not mean that the body ceases to exist. It does not mean pantheism, nor does it mean that a person becomes God. Rather, fana’ is the dissolving of the ego’s claim to independent existence. The servant no longer sees himself, or anything else, as an independent doer, giver, or sustainer alongside Allah. The veils of self-importance become thin. The heart begins to recognise that every power, gift, and act of sustaining belongs ultimately to Him.

The Qur’anic image of Prophet Musa at the mountain gives us a glimpse of this meaning. When divine disclosure came upon the mountain, it crumbled, and Musa fell senseless. The mountain could not remain before the overwhelming majesty of that disclosure. This is an image of fana’: the false strength of the self gives way before the Majesty of Allah.

Yet fana’ is not the end of the journey. What comes after it is baqa’. The servant returns to the world, but returns changed. He does not disappear from ordinary life. He may buy and sell, raise a family, and fulfil his responsibilities. He functions with sobriety, but his heart rests wholly in God. He sees everything *through* Allah: not as independent from Him, but as existing by His sustaining power and appearing through His wisdom.

This is the arc: lose the false self, then subsist through the True.

The lives and teachings of the spiritual masters help make this movement vivid. Shaykh Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili was travelling toward Mecca. His journey was not merely a movement of the body toward a sacred place; it also expressed the heart’s movement toward Allah, away from reliance upon its own claims.

Shaykh Abu al-Abbas al-Mursi used the date palm as an image of this transformation. The palm stands in the world, rooted and visible, yet it receives what allows it to live from beyond itself. In the same way, the servant remains present in creation while recognising that his true subsistence is from Allah.

A disciple once begged to "see God." He was taught that the veil is not distance. The veil is the self. The obstacle is not that Allah is far away, but that the ego insists upon its own independent reality. When the self is treated as the centre, it hides the truth that all things depend upon Allah.

But this teaching must be approached with care. There is a false or counterfeit fana'. Some people claim ecstatic states as an excuse for abandoning the Shari'ah, or they misunderstand their own experiences and imagine that spiritual language releases them from obedience. Such claims are not a sign of true realisation. The one who has truly recognised Allah does not become careless with the obligations of the path.

The words attributed to al-Hallaj, "Ana al-Haq" — "I am the Truth" — are a caution in this regard. They were spoken in a state of overwhelming and were widely misunderstood. They are not a model to imitate, nor a licence for dramatic spiritual claims. The thirsty heart should not seek spectacle. It should seek sincerity, soundness, and a life ordered by truth.

Fana' may also be seen in the sincere pursuit of knowledge. Imam al-Ghazali's fana' was found in his wholehearted search for knowledge and truth. The self that seeks praise, recognition, or personal advantage is gradually consumed by a deeper concern: to know what is true and to live by it.

Abu Bakr as-Siddiq shows another form of fana': boundless love for Allah. His heart was so given to his Lord that personal claim and self-interest became small beside love, loyalty, and surrender.

The sign of baqa' is therefore not withdrawal from life for its own sake. It is a God-centred life within life. The servant acts, but knows that action is enabled by Allah. He receives, but knows that every gift comes from Allah. He sustains others, but knows that Allah is the true Sustainer. He remains among people, yet his heart does not rest upon anything besides Him.

The way of return is not an escape into spiritual display. It is the return of the servant to ordinary responsibilities with an extraordinary inward orientation. Fana' removes the illusion of independence. Baqa' teaches the heart to live through Allah, seeing every created thing by Him and not by other than Him.

Seek, then, not the appearance of fana', but the reality of baqa': a life made humble, faithful, steady, and wholly centred upon God.

Reflect & Practise

1. Where does your heart most often treat yourself, another person, or a worldly means as independent of Allah?

2. What ordinary responsibility today can you fulfil while consciously recognising Allah as its true Sustainer?

Lesson 10 — The Summit of Servanthood

> العارف من لم يبق له في الحالين شاهد إلا الله
>
> *"The gnostic (’arif) is the one for whom, in both states—hardship and ease—no witness remains but Allah." — Ibn Ata’illah*

We have reached the summit.

The summit of this path is not a dazzling spiritual experience, a miracle, or a special station that others can see. It is something quieter and deeper: to become wholly Allah’s servant.

Ibn Ata’illah teaches that *ma’rifah* is not simply accumulated knowledge. It is not the ability to explain spiritual truths, repeat beautiful words, or win an argument about faith. Ma’rifah is direct witnessing. It is a certainty tasted by the heart.

The *’arif* sees Allah in every condition. In poverty and wealth, the heart does not become lost in either. In sickness and health, it does not imagine that one state brings Allah near while the other removes Him. Ease does not veil Allah, and hardship does not hide Him. Behind every state, the heart recognises its Lord.

This does not mean that hardship feels easy or that sickness is welcomed without pain. It means that no condition is allowed to become the heart’s final witness. The servant may feel weakness, sorrow, gratitude, relief, or fear, but beneath every changing experience is the remembrance of Allah.

That is why the greatest station is *’ubudiyyah*: pure servanthood.

Servanthood is the hidden crown. It carries no visible badge. It may not produce a story that impresses anyone. It may appear as quiet obedience, sincere repentance, patient endurance, gratitude in ease, and humility before Allah. The highest rank a human being reached was the rank of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and Allah named him first as His servant —*’abduhu*—and then as His messenger. Servanthood came before messengership.

This teaches us where true honour lies. The honour of the creature is not independence from Allah. It is to belong completely to Him.

Do not chase *karamah*. Do not make miracles, unveilings, or extraordinary experiences the aim of the journey. Many people can be deceived by the desire to witness wonders. The heart may begin seeking spiritual spectacle rather than seeking Allah. It may want a station, a sign, or an experience that confirms its importance.

The sincere servant seeks something more hidden: to be a true slave of Allah.

The question is not whether we have been shown something unusual. The question is whether we have become more faithful, more humble, more obedient, and more present with our Lord. The true crown of the path is not what appears outwardly. It is the heart's surrender when no one is watching.

Ibn Ata'illah's *Kitab al-Hikam* remains a living book because it speaks from a journey of the heart: a journey of repentance, love, and return that leads finally to servanthood. Seven centuries later, its wisdom still guides hearts because the human need remains the same. We still forget, become distracted, depend on created things, and mistake knowledge for transformation. We still need to return to the One who has never left us.

True *ma'rifah* does not make a person proud. It makes the person bow.

As the Malay proverb says: *seperti padi, semakin berisi semakin tunduk*—like the rice stalk, the fuller it grows, the lower it bows. The more the heart knows Allah, the less it claims for itself. The more it witnesses divine generosity, the less it sees its own greatness. The more it understands servanthood, the more naturally it returns to humility.

This is a return to *fitrah*: the natural state of the soul recognising its Lord and living in service to Him. Before the heart became crowded with pride, fear, attachment, and self-importance, it knew that it belonged to Allah. The path has been a return to that simplicity—not a return to ignorance, but a return to truth.

We began with return: turning back after having wandered. We learned trust when the road was unclear, remembrance when the heart became forgetful, and faith when certainty felt distant. We learned *adab*, the humility of standing rightly before Allah. We learned patience and gratitude through changing conditions. We came to know the self, then moved through love, until the self's false claims began to fade in *fana'* and true abiding in Allah's servanthood appeared in *baqa'*.

Now the whole journey gathers into one breath:

Return to Allah. Trust Allah. Remember Allah. Live with faith and adab. Be patient in hardship and grateful in ease. Know the self, love the Lord, let the false self fall away, and remain as His servant.

The summit is not becoming someone extraordinary. It is becoming truly what you were created to be.

A servant.

Reflect & Practise

1. In which changing condition—hardship or ease—do you most easily lose sight of Allah, and what does this reveal about where your heart places its final witness?
2. What quiet act of sincere servanthood will you practise today without seeking recognition, spiritual excitement, or reward from anyone but Allah?

Closing: Walking On

You have reached the end of the ten lessons, but not the end of the path. The *Kitab al-Hikam* was never meant to be finished; it was meant to be lived. Ibn Ata'illah's aphorisms return the heart, again and again, to a single truth: that we are always being called home, and the door of return is never closed.

If these lessons have stirred something, let it become practice. Choose one *Reflect & Practise* question that unsettled you most, and live with it for a week. Keep a small, steady portion of *dhikr* — even a little, done constantly, outweighs much that is interrupted. And when you fall, as every traveller does, remember the very first lesson: do not let a fault shrink your hope. The one who truly trusts Allah rises with greater hope, not less.

Where to go next

- **Revisit the sequence.** Read the ten lessons again in order. What felt abstract the first time often becomes personal the second.
- **Deepen the source.** This course is a doorway; the full *Kitab al-Hikam* rewards a lifetime of reading.
- **Continue with Falah Digital.** Explore the wider library of micro-courses and workbooks at **store.falahos.my**, where this course is part of a growing collection on Islamic thought, spirituality, and practice.

> *"Whoever's beginning is radiant, his end is radiant too." — Ibn Ata'illah al-Sakandari*