

When the Heart Cannot Raise Its Hands

Al-Ghazālī, al-Qushayrī, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, and Ibn ‘Ajība on contraction,
helplessness, and the prayer of need

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There are moments when a person knows that Allah is the only One who can help them, yet even turning to Him feels beyond their strength. The difficulty is not disbelief, nor is it necessarily unwillingness. The heart may simply become so exhausted that the ordinary movements of worship begin to feel heavy. A person who once made du‘ā’ easily may find that the words no longer come. Someone who once raised their hands instinctively may lie awake knowing that they should ask Allah for help while feeling unable to gather enough inward strength even to begin.

What often makes this state worse is the judgment that follows it. The person is already tired, frightened, disappointed, or emotionally depleted, and then begins to accuse themselves for the very weakness through which they are suffering. They think that if their faith were real, du‘ā’ would come easily. If Allah were near, the heart would feel alive. If they were sincere, they would cry, speak, pray, and hope as they once did. The absence of spiritual energy then becomes evidence in their own mind that something has gone wrong between them and Allah.

The classical masters of the inner life were far more careful. They knew that there are forms of spiritual weakness that must be resisted, but they also knew that the heart passes through states which cannot simply be commanded away. They spoke of **qabḍ**, contraction, of **futūr**, the loss of vigor in worship, of **ḥayra**, bewilderment, of **‘ajz**, helplessness, and of **idṭirār**, the desperate poverty of a person who has reached the end of every means available to them.

Read together, al-Ghazālī, al-Qushayrī, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, and Ibn ‘Ajība offer a remarkably gentle account of what may be happening when the heart no longer possesses the strength it once had. Their answer is not that worship no longer matters. It is that the servant must learn the difference between worshipping Allah and relying upon his own ability to worship Him.

Brokenness does not mean abandonment

Al-Ghazālī begins from a simple but easily forgotten truth. In *Bidāyat al-Hidāya*, while speaking about companionship with Allah, he reminds the servant that there is a Companion who does not disappear when every other source of comfort does.

اعلم أن صاحبك الذي لا يفارقت في حضرك وسفرك بل في حياتك وموتك هو ربك
وسيدك ومولاك وخالقك

Know that your Companion, who never parts from you whether you are at home or traveling, indeed throughout your life and in your death, is your Lord, your Master, your Patron, and your Creator.

He then speaks directly about the broken heart.

ومهما انكسر قلبك حزناً على تقصيرك في حق دينك فهو صاحبك وملازمك

Whenever your heart is broken with grief over your shortcomings in what you owe to your religion, He is your Companion and the One who remains constantly with you.

Al-Ghazālī, Bidāyat al-Hidāya, p. 63.

The importance of the passage lies in the order of its ideas. Al-Ghazālī does not first require the servant to repair his heart and then promise divine companionship afterward. He speaks about companionship precisely while the heart is broken. The servant may be grieving his own weakness, ashamed of his shortcomings, and unable to find the spiritual condition he believes he should possess, yet none of this makes Allah cease to be his Lord or Companion.

Al-Ghazālī then cites the devotional report

أنا عند المنكسرة قلوبهم من أجلي

I am with those whose hearts are broken for My sake.

The wording should not be presented as an authenticated Prophetic ḥadīth qudsī. Al-Ghazālī nevertheless invokes it here to make a clear spiritual point. Brokenness is not itself proof of abandonment.

This distinction matters because a heart in pain often confuses feeling with reality. It does not feel nearness, so it concludes that Allah is distant. It cannot form a beautiful du‘ā’, so it concludes that Allah does not want to hear it. It lacks the energy it once possessed, so it concludes that its faith has disappeared. Al-Ghazālī interrupts that logic at the beginning. The heart may be broken while divine companionship remains.

When the heart becomes contracted

Al-Qushayrī gives a more precise vocabulary for the state itself. In *al-Risāla*, he distinguishes **qabḍ** from ordinary fear. Fear ordinarily concerns something that may happen in the future. A person fears losing something beloved, or fears the arrival of something painful. Hope likewise looks ahead toward something desired.

Qabḍ is different.

وأما القبض فعنى حاصل في الوقت وكذلك البسط

Contraction is a state occurring in the present moment, and expansion is likewise.

He explains that the person undergoing qabḍ may be overtaken so completely by the present state that there is little inward room for anything else. One of the masters expressed this by saying

أنا مردم

I am blocked up.

Al-Qushayrī explains the meaning as

أي لا مساغ في

There is no room within me.

Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, vol. 1, pp. 156 to 157.

This language is striking because it resembles the way severe spiritual exhaustion often feels. The person is not merely sad about something. The interior itself feels narrowed. They cannot easily move from one state into another. They may know intellectually that Allah is merciful and still find that the heart cannot presently taste that mercy. They may know that du‘ā’ is beautiful and still feel unable to enter into it.

Al-Qushayrī goes further and acknowledges that the cause of such contraction may not even be clear.

وقد يكون قبض يشكل على صاحبه سببه يجد في قلبه قبضاً لا يدري موجه ولا سببه

Sometimes a contraction occurs whose cause is obscure to the person experiencing it. He finds contraction within his heart while knowing neither what occasioned it nor what caused it.

Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, vol. 1, p. 157.

That sentence alone removes a great deal of unnecessary self-accusation. Not every inward state arrives with an explanation that can immediately be discovered. Sometimes there is something concrete that must be corrected, repented from, treated, or changed. Sometimes the person is

exhausted, ill, grieving, or overwhelmed. Yet al-Qushayrī still leaves room for a contraction whose cause remains obscure to the person undergoing it.

His counsel in such a state is even more important.

فسبيل صاحب هذا القبض التسليم حتى يمضي ذلك الوقت

The way for the person undergoing such a contraction is surrender until that moment has passed.

He then warns

لأنه لو تكلف نفيه أو استقبل الوقت قبل هجومه عليه باختياره زاد في قبضه

For if he were to strain himself to drive the contraction away, or if by his own choice he tried to bring upon himself another state before its proper time had arrived, he would only increase his contraction.

Al-Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, vol. 1, p. 157.

This does not mean that the servant abandons worship whenever worship feels difficult. Al-Qushayrī is describing something subtler. A person can become so disturbed by the absence of a desired spiritual state that he begins trying to manufacture it by force. He demands tears because he cannot cry, demands expansion because he feels contracted, and demands immediate emotional certainty because uncertainty frightens him. When the heart fails to obey those demands, the failure itself becomes another source of distress.

Al-Qushayrī therefore counsels *taslīm*, surrender to the reality of the present moment without turning that moment into a final judgment about one's relationship with Allah. The One who contracts is also the One who expands.

Even brokenness can produce futūr in worship

Al-Ghazālī gives a remarkable example of this in *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā* while explaining the Divine Names al-Qābiḍ and al-Bāsiṭ.

He writes that Allah contracts and expands the hearts.

ويقبض القلوب فيضيّقها بما يكشف لها من قلة مبالاته وتعالیه وجلاله ويبسطها بما يقرب إليها من بره ولطفه وجماله

He contracts the hearts, making them constricted through what He unveils to them of His utter independence, His exaltedness, and His majesty, and He expands them through what He brings near to them of His goodness, His gentleness, and His beauty.

Al-Ghazālī, al-Maqṣad al-Asnā, p. 88.

He then describes the Companions hearing the frightening report about the immense number from the children of Adam who would be sent toward the Fire. Their reaction is described in an unusually direct way.

فانكسرت قلوبهم حتى فتروا عن العبادة

Their hearts were broken, until they became languid in worship.

The word **futūr** does not simply mean laziness. It is a slackening after strength, a loss of vigor after vigor. The Companions were not being described as people who had ceased caring about Allah. Their hearts had been struck so deeply by fear that their spiritual energy weakened.

What follows is even more instructive.

فلما أصبح وراهم على ما هم عليه من القبض والفتور روح قلوبهم وبسطهم

When morning came and he saw them in the state of contraction and spiritual weariness in which they had remained, he brought relief to their hearts and expanded them.

Al-Ghazālī, al-Maṣṣad al-Asnā, p. 88.

The Prophetic response in al-Ghazālī's telling is not to increase the pressure upon hearts already broken by fear. He gives them hope. He brings relief. He creates space inside a condition that had become too narrow.

There is a profound spiritual principle here. The heart does not always need more of the medicine that originally awakened it. Fear may awaken a heedless person, but the same language can crush a person who is already terrified. A reminder of judgment may shake someone out of carelessness, while a person already drowning in self-accusation may need to remember mercy, gentleness, and the possibility of return.

The spiritual physician treats the heart that is actually before him, not an imaginary heart.

Al-Ghazālī and the collapse of ordinary capacity

Al-Ghazālī's own life gives the discussion an even more personal dimension. In *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, he describes the crisis that preceded his departure from Baghdad. His inward conflict became so severe that the matter passed beyond ordinary voluntary choice. His tongue would not cooperate when he attempted to teach. His appetite weakened, his physical strength declined, and physicians told him that the illness had begun in the heart and spread into the body.

Then he writes

ثم لما أحسست بعجزني وسقط بالكلية اختياري التجأت إلى الله تعالى التجاء المضطر
الذي لا حيلة له

Then, when I became conscious of my helplessness, and my power of choice had completely fallen away from me, I sought refuge in Allah Most High with the seeking of one driven by utter necessity, who possesses no means whatsoever.

Al-Ghazālī, al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl, p. 99.

The decisive word is ‘ajz.

Helplessness.

Al-Ghazālī does not describe himself reaching this point and suddenly producing an impressive spiritual performance. He describes becoming conscious of the collapse of his own ability. He then turns to Allah as **al-muḍṭarr**, the desperate person who possesses no remaining device by which to save himself.

There is an important difference between romanticizing helplessness and recognizing what helplessness can expose. Al-Ghazālī’s condition was painful. Nothing in the passage suggests that illness, grief, or collapse should be sought for their own sake. Yet when human ability failed, the failure did not close the road to Allah. It revealed the servant’s dependence upon Him with a clarity that strength can sometimes conceal.

The hidden reliance upon our own worship

This is where Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh and Ibn ‘Ajība deepen the argument.

One reason the loss of spiritual capacity can feel so frightening is that a person may have unknowingly begun relying upon the acts through which he sought Allah. Prayer is good. Du‘ā’ is good. Tears are good. Discipline is good. None of this is in question.

The problem begins when hope becomes attached not to Allah, but to one’s own ability to keep producing those things.

Ibn ‘Ajība writes

وعلاوة اعتماده على الله أنه لا ينقص رجاءه إذا وقع في العصيان ولا يزيد رجاءه إذا صدر منه إحسان

The sign that a person relies upon Allah is that his hope does not diminish when he falls into disobedience, nor does his hope increase when some good deed proceeds from him.

He contrasts this with the person who relies upon his own works.

بخلاف المعتمد على الأعمال إذا قل عمله قل رجاءه وإذا كثر عمله كثر رجاءه

This is unlike the person who relies upon his works. When his works decrease, his hope decreases, and when his works increase, his hope increases.

The point is not that obedience has no value. Ibn ‘Ajība later states explicitly that refusing to rely upon works does not mean abandoning them. Rather, the heart must distinguish between performing an act and treating the act as the foundation of its safety.

This distinction often remains hidden during periods of spiritual ease. A person prays well, makes long du‘ā’, wakes at night, feels moved by Qur’ān, and assumes that their hope is in Allah. Then their strength weakens. Suddenly their sense of security collapses with their spiritual productivity.

At that moment the servant may discover that part of what he trusted was not merely Allah, but his own ability to turn to Allah successfully.

Poverty was always there

Ibn ‘Ajība explains that hardship does not create the servant’s dependence. It reveals a dependence that was present all along.

فاقتك أيها الإنسان لك ذاتية أي أصلية حقيقية لكنها خفية

Your poverty, O human being, is intrinsic to you. It is original and real, though ordinarily hidden.

He then speaks of

الشدة والحيرة وكل ما يلجئك إلى مولاك

Hardship, bewilderment, and everything that drives you helplessly toward your Master.

Among the examples he explicitly names are

كالفتن والمرض وغيرهما

Tribulations, illness, and other things.

Ibn ‘Ajība, Īqāz al-Himam, p. 207.

Health and ease do not abolish this poverty. They simply make it easier to forget.

والفاقة الأصلية الذاتية لا ترفعها العوارض وهي الصحة والعافية

This original, intrinsic poverty is not removed by passing conditions such as health and well-being.

Then

فإذا قام عليه جلال أو محرك ظهر افتقاره وتحقق اضطرابه

*When some manifestation of majesty or some stirring circumstance comes upon him,
his poverty becomes manifest and his desperate need becomes realized.*

Ibn ‘Ajība, Īqāz al-Himam, p. 207.

The person who says, “I used to be able to raise my hands and now I cannot,” may instinctively think that the earlier strength belonged to him and the present weakness is an alien interruption. Ibn ‘Ajība asks him to look deeper. The strength was also a gift. The words were a gift. The tenderness was a gift. The ability to ask was a gift. None of these were ever independently possessed.

The difficulty has therefore not necessarily created a new poverty. It may have uncovered the poverty that ease had hidden.

Ibn ‘Ajība summarizes the human condition with unusual force.

وأصلك أيها الإنسان هو الفاقة والاضطرار والذلة والانكسار

Your origin, O human being, is poverty, desperate need, lowliness, and brokenness.

Then Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh says

خير أوقاتك وقت تشهد فيه وجود فافتك وترد فيه إلى وجود ذلتك

*The best of your times is the time in which you witness the reality of your poverty and
are returned to the reality of your lowliness.*

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, al-Ḥikam, as explained by Ibn ‘Ajība in Īqāz al-Himam, pp. 207 to 208.

This does not make suffering desirable in itself. It means that a difficult state can become spiritually truthful when it removes the illusion that the servant was ever self-sustaining.

There is a tongue beneath speech

The most beautiful connection appears later in Ibn ‘Ajība’s commentary.

He writes

فالطلب عند العارفين ليس هو بلسان المقال وإنما هو بلسان الحال وهو الاضطرار وظهور
الذلة والافتقار

*The asking of the knowers is not through the tongue of verbal speech. Rather, it is
through the tongue of their state, and that state is desperate need together with the
manifestation of lowliness and utter poverty.*

Ibn ‘Ajība, Īqāz al-Himam, p. 258.

Then comes Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s aphorism.

ما طلب لك شيء مثل الاضطرار ولا أسرع بالمواهب مثل الذلة والافتقار

Nothing pleads on your behalf like desperate need, and nothing hastens gifts toward you like lowliness and utter poverty.

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, al-Ḥikam, p. 258 in Ibn ‘Ajība’s commentary.

This gives a careful classical form to the intuition that a person’s brokenness may itself speak before Allah.

It would be too loose to say that every silence is literally a du‘ā’. Ibn ‘Ajība says something more precise. There is *lisān al-maqāl*, the tongue of spoken expression, and there is *lisān al-ḥāl*, the tongue of one’s actual condition.

He explains *iḍṭirār* through the image of someone drowning at sea or lost in a wilderness. Such a person sees no source of sufficiency except his Lord and hopes for rescue from no one else.

This is not the abandonment of du‘ā’. It is the discovery that du‘ā’ is deeper than eloquence.

A person may have no impressive words left and still possess need. He may be unable to produce tears while his entire condition testifies that he needs Allah. He may feel too exhausted to articulate everything in his heart while Allah already knows what the heart cannot arrange into sentences.

The drowning person does not need to make his drowning sound beautiful before rescue can reach him.

What remains when the act becomes difficult

Ibn ‘Ajība prevents all of this from being misunderstood as a justification for abandoning worship.

He writes plainly

ثم إن عدم الاعتماد على العمل لا يقتضي ترك العمل

Not relying upon one’s works does not entail abandoning works.

The servant continues to act while refusing to place his reliance upon the action itself.

Then he addresses diminished capacity.

فإن لم يقدر على مداومته بالفعل فبالحبة والعزم

But if he is unable to maintain that obedience through actual performance, then let it remain through love and resolve.

He cites Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s intimate supplication.

إلهي إنك تعلم وإن لم تدم الطاعة مني فعلاً جزماً فقد دامت محبة وعزماً

My God, You know that even if obedience from me has not remained continually present as an accomplished act, it has nevertheless remained continually present as love and resolve.

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, as cited in Ibn ‘Ajība’s Īqāz al-Himam, p. 515.

Ibn ‘Ajība then adds

وأما نفوذه فقد يقدر وقد لا يقدر

As for actually carrying the matter through, he may be able to do so, and he may be unable to do so.

This is not a general legal ruling that obligations disappear whenever a person feels spiritually weak. It is a distinction between love, intention, resolve, and present capacity. A person may genuinely love obedience while struggling to perform it with the strength they once possessed. Allah knows the difference between a heart that has turned away and a heart that still faces Him while weakened.

When the heart cannot raise its hands

The person who cannot raise his hands should therefore not be told that the hands do not matter. They do matter. Du‘ā’ matters. Prayer matters. Striving matters. When the servant possesses the strength to act, he should act.

But the classical tradition does not allow him to turn temporary incapacity into a verdict of divine rejection.

Al-Ghazālī tells him that brokenness does not end companionship with Allah.

Al-Qushayrī tells him that contraction may seize the heart in the present moment, sometimes for reasons the person cannot even identify, and that violently trying to manufacture another state may deepen the contraction.

Al-Ghazālī tells him that hearts can become so broken that futūr enters worship, and that such hearts may need relief and expansion rather than another increase of fear.

Al-Ghazālī’s own life shows him a moment in which ordinary capacity collapsed and turning to Allah became the turning of **al-muḍṭarr**, the desperately needy person who possessed no remaining means.

Ibn ‘Ajība tells him that hardship can reveal the poverty that ease had hidden.

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh tells him that nothing pleads on his behalf like desperate need.

And Ibn ‘Ajība tells him that when the tongue of speech becomes weak, there remains the tongue of the state.

Perhaps the deepest correction comes in another aphorism of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh.

فوصلك إليه بما منه إليك لا بما منك إليه

He brings you to Him by what comes from Him to you, not by what comes from you to Him.

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, al-Ḥikam, as explained by Ibn ‘Ajība in Īqāz al-Himam, p. 259.

The exhausted servant imagines that he cannot reach Allah because he has too little to offer. Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh turns the matter around. The servant was never reaching Allah through something independently originating from himself. The strength to worship, the desire to ask, the softness of the heart, the words upon the tongue, and the very turning toward Allah were gifts before they were acts.

The disappearance of some of those gifts for a time does not make Allah absent. It may instead expose how completely the servant depended upon Him even when he felt strong.

There may therefore be moments when the most honest turning to Allah is not a long supplication. It may be a few words spoken without feeling. It may be a tired repetition of His Name. It may be the heart admitting that it does not know what to say. And in a state of extreme exhaustion, it may be the servant simply remaining before Allah with the knowledge that he needs Him, even when that knowledge has not yet become eloquent speech.

The aim is not to glorify incapacity. It is to refuse to make incapacity another reason for despair.

A person should seek help when help is needed, take treatment when treatment is needed, fulfill what Allah has obligated according to his actual ability, and continue whatever good remains within reach. Yet he should not believe that Allah only receives him when he arrives spiritually impressive.

The heart may be contracted while Allah remains its Lord. The tongue may be exhausted while Allah still knows what it could not say. The hands may feel too heavy to rise while the servant remains utterly poor before the One to whom those hands would have been raised.

And perhaps this is the most difficult form of reliance.

Not trusting Allah only when one feels capable of trusting Him beautifully, but discovering that even when the servant’s own capacity weakens, the One upon whom he depends has not changed.

Principal sources

Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Bidāyat al-Hidāya*, p. 63.

Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-Asnā fī Sharḥ Ma‘ānī Asmā’ Allāh al-Ḥusnā*, p. 88.

Imām Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, p. 99.

Imām Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, vol. 1, pp. 156 to 157.

Imām Aḥmad Ibn ‘Ajība, *Īqāz al-Himam fī Sharḥ al-Ḥikam*, pp. 25, 207 to 208, 258 to 259, and 515.

Imām Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī, *al-Ḥikam al-‘Aṭā’iyya*, in the passages cited and explained by Ibn ‘Ajība above.