

FATEMI DAWAT
IKHWANUS SAFA ARTICLE SERIES

‘Ilm

paper 2

THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

The Ikhwan's Vibrant Approach

Table of Contents

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The Pursuit of Knowledge The Ikhwan's Vibrant Approach

Introduction: Nothing More Virtuous than the Pursuit of Knowledge.....	1
Exploring this World & Looking Beyond to the Hereafter	2
The Fundamental Purpose of Knowledge: To Find Spirituality and the Creator	3
<i>The Example of Mathematics, Music & Others</i>	<i>4</i>
Conclusion: Exploration, Self-Discovery & Realisation	5

Introduction: Nothing More Virtuous than the Pursuit of Knowledge

"Know O Brother! May Allah help you and us with His Spirit – that Allah has made obligatory upon the *mumineen* many things that they should do and many things that they should not. After professing the Oneness of Allah and doing *ma'arefat* and *mohabbat* of his *Awliya* – *Anbiya*, *Aimmat* and *Duat*, **there is nothing Allah has made more necessary, honourable, virtuous, lofty and beneficial for Allah's servant, or that will bring him closer to Him, than knowledge, its pursuit and its learning.**"

وَاعْلَمْ يَا أَخِي، أَيَّدَكَ اللَّهُ وَإِيَّانَا بِرُوحٍ مِنْهُ، بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ، جَلَّ ثَنَاؤُهُ، قَدْ فَرَضَ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَشْيَاءَ كَثِيرَةً يَفْعَلُونَهَا، وَنَهَاهُمْ عَنْ أَشْيَاءَ كَثِيرَةٍ يَتْرَكُونَهَا، وَلَكِنْ لَيْسَ مِنْ فَرِيضَةٍ مِنْ جَمِيعِ مَفْرُوضَاتِ الشَّرِيعَةِ وَأَحْكَامِ النَّامُوسِ أَوْجِبُ وَلَا أَفْضَلُ وَلَا أَجَلُّ وَلَا أَشْرَفُ وَلَا أَنْفَعُ لِعَبْدٍ، وَلَا أَقْرَبُ لَهُ إِلَى رَبِّهِ بَعْدَ الْإِقْرَارِ بِهِ، وَالتَّصَدِّيقِ لِأَنْبِيَائِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ فِيمَا جَاءُوا بِهِ، وَخَبَرُوا عَنْهُ، مِنَ الْعِلْمِ وَطَلَبِهِ وَتَعَلُّمِهِ

One of the biggest bounties given by God to man is his ability to gather information, acquire knowledge and wisdom, and evaluate truth and falsehood. These are the faculties given to humans in order to rise in the levels of knowledge:

1. The five senses (*al-quwwat al-bassasa*)
2. The natural instinctive intellect (acquiring, understanding and remembering powers of the intellect, *al-aql al-gharizi*)
3. The acquired intellect (analyzing, inferring and deductive power of the intellect, *al-aql al-muktasab*)

All these faculties are related; each higher faculty is dependent on the one lower to it. If there were no senses to transmit information of physical things, the intellect would not be used or developed; if the intellectual capacity was not formed, no logical proofs (*burhaan*), would be formulated to reach deductions about things beyond immediate sensual perception, leading to an understanding of abstract and spiritual concepts.

The human being is in the ‘middle’ level of creation, between the purely physical and the purely spiritual, combining elements of both worlds. To know the things ‘lower’ to him, the physical world, he uses his five senses. Abstract, intellectual and spiritual matters, which are ‘above’ him, are beyond the realm of the senses and beyond the grasp of imagination. It is only by his intellect’s use of *burhaan* (compelling logical proofs), that he can progress from the physical to the spiritual and deduce the things ‘above’ him.

Exploring this World & Looking Beyond to the Hereafter

Maulana Ali A.S. has said,

The greatest wealth is intelligence and the worst poverty is foolishness.

أَغْنَى الْغِنَى الْعَقْلُ وَأَفْقَرُ الْفَقْرِ الْحُمُقُ

Human beings differ widely in terms of the strength or weakness of their intellect. However, it is up to every person to develop his intellect to its utmost potential, both the intelligence that he was born with (*ghariz*), and the intelligence that he acquires (*muktasab*). The rational human being is discouraged from spending his life so caught up in the daily business and pleasures of this physical world that he cannot see beyond it. He is encouraged and exhorted, to perceive the physical world and material things in depth, to explore the amazing and wondrous creations of God, to contemplate their finite and changing nature, and to go beyond their outward appearance to examine their essential reality. This consciousness can be acquired through your environment, travel and books, by listening to people who have seen and experienced, and today even through visual media.

Such an outlook is termed the “right way” (*zaat al yamen*) by the Ikhwan us Safa (as opposed to the left). This exercise of deep contemplation boosts intellectual capacity. If that capacity, in turn, is trained and equipped by the acquisition of knowledge to make deductions and reach abstract conclusions, spiritual understanding (*uloom rubaniyah*) increases; this is more so because physical matters are parallel to spiritual matters, the working laws of this world are parallel to the working laws of the world of religion (*deen*). The one who has more knowledge of spiritual matters and the metaphysical realities (*haqaiq*) is the one closer in resemblance to the angels and therefore closer to Allah.

The Fundamental Purpose of Knowledge: To Find Spirituality and the Creator

The Ikhwaan us Safa state that they love all knowledge, all *ilm*, be it secular or religious, as all *ilm* brings honour. They do not oppose any *ilm*, nor are they hostile to or prejudiced against any school of thought. Indeed, they say “our knowledge encompasses all knowledge”.

عَلَّمْنَا يَسْتَعْرِقُ جَمِيعَ الْعُلُومِ

The fundamental aim of knowledge, however, is to gain recognition of the spirituality of one’s soul and its Divine Creator. The simple criteria for the value of knowledge is whether it leads one towards self-knowledge and towards God.

The Ikhwaan us Safa say that God has made man in such a way that curiosity about the knowledge of the Creator (*ma’arefat*) is in his very nature: when an intelligent person sees and contemplates, for example, the different plants, the various types of fruit, the thousands of different types of leaves and flowers with their different colours, sizes, smells, shapes, and tastes, he should come to the conclusion that this diversity and perfection, this interconnection with its environment precludes the evidence of chance and randomness. There is a Maker, a Doer who is the Creator, Who is a *Hakeem*, Who is wise and has made these things differently for a purpose.

This is the simple admission that there is a Creator, and that Creator is Allah: “there is no Creator but Allah”.

لا اله الا الله

However, this is the first, most basic initial step towards true *ma’refat* and recognition of the Divine Creator, towards true *tawheed*. To achieve that goal, it is important to start with oneself: to realise, first and foremost, that the human being is not just a body but also a soul, which is separate and different from the body, and thus to proceed from the physical to the spiritual. Knowledge of one’s soul is the necessary prelude to the *ma’refat* of God. Rasulullah SA, has said,

He who knows his soul will know his Lord.

مَنْ عَرَفَ نَفْسَهُ فَقَدْ عَرَفَ رَبَّهُ

Accepting the spiritual existence of the soul naturally leads a person to recognition of the larger spiritual world, to questioning the essence of all physical things. He will

then have to pursue and rise in the levels of knowledge through formal learning, under the guidance of a teacher, to understand the relation of the physical to the spiritual, and to progress from his own self to the whole universe and thence to the Creator.

The Example of Mathematics, Music & Others

On the one hand, every field of knowledge and every subject if studied with relevance to one's own self makes it meaningful and useful. For example, mathematics becomes useful when applied to one's daily life, in managing one's finances. On the other hand, that connection can also lead one to the higher philosophical level. To take the same example of mathematics, at the philosophical level it can be demonstrated through mathematics that God is one, all begins from Him and will return to Him, just as all numbers start from the number one and return to it. Music, which is an integral part of most people's lives, teaches one harmony, signifying the harmony of all creation. Geography, by exploring the wonders of the world, makes one wonder at the greatness of their Creator. The study of history makes one aware of the recurring cycles of the human experience, and through that to the grand pattern of Divine Providence. In fact, the Ikhwaan us Safa demonstrate in their *Rasa'il* the Oneness of God to people from various professions and fields of knowledge through their own craft or subject, so that it is easier for them to comprehend that all of creation is interconnected by God's *hikmat*, *itqaan* and *izn*, His wisdom, precision and will. They say:

<i>In everything there is a Divine sign which indicates that He is One.</i>	وَفِي كُلِّ شَيْءٍ لَهُ آيَةٌ * تَذُلُّ عَلَى أَنَّهُ وَاحِدٌ
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This approach – the seeking of the deeper spiritual existence behind the outward physical world, in search of the Divine – is the first step in the pursuit of knowledge in the true sense. It is to arouse people to this mind-set that the Ikhwaan us Safa say repeatedly

<i>"Wake up! Wake up, O brother, from the sleep of unawareness and the slumber of ignorance."</i>	اِنتَبِهْ يَا أَخِي، مِنْ نَوْمِ الْعَقْلَةِ وَرَقْدَةِ الْجَهَالَةِ
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Conclusion: Exploration, Self-Discovery & Realisation

It is the intention (*niyyat*) and the approach to learning which is important for the *Ikhwan*. The person who does not know his own eternal soul will be doing everything only for his finite bodily existence. The person who does not look at the world around him with curiosity and wonder as to why and how amazingly it is made, will not find indications of the Divine Creator. Any pursuit of knowledge, of research, study, and exploration, which takes one deeper into the physical universe without reference to the Divine Creator, is not carried out in the correct manner. In fact, according to the Ikhwaan us Safa,

“Know O Brother! Any knowledge and adab which does not make its learner go toward the hereafter and does not help one in reaching it is a calamity for the learner and an argument against him on the day of qayamat.”

وَأَعْلَمُ يَا أَخِي، بِأَنَّ كُلَّ عِلْمٍ وَأَدَبٍ لَا يُؤَدِّي صَاحِبَهُ إِلَى
طَلَبِ الْآخِرَةِ، وَلَا يُعِينُهُ عَلَى الْوُصُولِ إِلَيْهَا، فَهُوَ وَبَالٌ
عَلَى صَاحِبِهِ وَحُجَّةٌ عَلَيْهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ

To summarise, the pursuit of knowledge according to the Ikhwaan us Safa should be understood in a very broad and vibrant sense. Learning is a journey of exploration, from inquiry about everything to self-discovery and realisation. It is about recognising the world all around you, examining why things are the way they are; it is about becoming conscious of the self, understanding that you exist, learning why you exist, where you came from, where you will go and what your relevance is in this scheme of existence. And finally it is about knowing your Creator to the best of one's ability.