

FATEMI DAWAT
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‘Ilm

paper 6

The Ladder of Knowledge

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Introduction

The human soul is not capable of accepting knowledge altogether at once. It has to proceed gradually, go step by step over time to rise in its levels. The Ikhwan us Safa give the analogy of food to illustrate the necessity of gradual progression in knowledge. Food produces strength and growth. A healthy child requires proper nutrition of food that is suitable and good for him in suitable quantities to grow; the type of nutrition gradually becomes more complex and his intake is gradually increased as his digestive system develops. If in infancy he is fed the complex food that he eats when fully grown, he will not be able to digest it and could become ill or even die. Similarly, one has to gain a familiarity and vigour in one level of knowledge before attempting to study a higher more complex level or it will not be digested and could cause harm. To avoid what is the cause of health and life in one context itself becoming the reason for sickness and death in another, it is important to regulate the intake of knowledge, as of food, according to the readiness of the student.

The Awakening of the Mind's Eye (*Baseerat*) to the Reality of the Soul

Drowned in the sea of matter and embedded in the physical here and now, man's inclination is concentrated on the needs and passions of the body and its bewitchment with its pleasures; more often than not he is ignorant and oblivious of the soul and its needs. Some become so occupied with this life that they ignore all but the pleasures of the body; others in their intellectual arrogance hold that nothing that cannot be empirically proven exists, science for them is God. Such people will drown deeper and deeper in the sea of matter, and their *baseerat* will be more and more suppressed under the darkness of ignorance.

Baseerat is the inner eye of the intellect; with it one comprehends the fundamental logic of religion (*deen*) and consequently sees everything – the universe with its laws, nature and its cycles, human beings and the progression of their lives – with the mind-set of religion; religion encompasses everything. This inner-eyesight is gained through the basic understanding and acquaintance with the key doctrine of faith (*ma'rafat*), and becomes sharper with deeper knowledge of religion. The value of worldly knowledge is generally accepted because it equips one for earning a livelihood. However, the soul has to be firstly awakened to the significance of religious knowledge because its benefit is geared towards the hereafter. It is only when one wakes from the sleep of oblivion, the slumber of ignorance, the state of blind unconsciousness that he starts seeing with *baseerat*. It is then that his journey of knowledge begins in earnest.

The Ladder of Knowledge

For secular education, it is known and accepted that a child has to first go through a pre-school phase – nursery/ kindergarten – and then to primary and secondary school, one class/ grade after the other, and then after completing that to university. One cannot start university without previous schooling.

In the knowledge of religion as well, a gradual progression is indispensable. To rise up in the levels of knowledge (*darajaat*), one has to start from the very beginning. There is generally a degree of resistance to this idea, mainly because unlike schooling religious education today is not always age related, and adults who have acquired a certain level of ‘worldly education’ find it difficult to accept that they may be novices where religious knowledge (*ilm*) is concerned.

The acquisition of knowledge for the *Ikhwan* is like climbing a ladder, rising from the nearest and most accessible to the farthest and most difficult, from the physical to the metaphysical, from the *ẓāhir* to the *tawēel* to the *haqeeqat*. To get to the top of the ladder you will have to start climbing from the bottom. If you have not acquired a firm foothold on the lower steps of the ladder, the higher steps will be shaky and unattainable in their essential substance and depth.

As one gains knowledge, the soul becomes more and more purified, and consequently more receptive in accepting further knowledge, eventually the more lofty, profound and noble *ilm*. With knowledge, awareness of one’s own existence and ultimately that of God increases. This consciousness is manifested in good actions and the strengthening of character; if it does not have these effects, it means that the knowledge has not taken root, and the soul is not purified. The names of the *kitabs* one has studied need not be equivalent to level in *ilm* (*darajaat*); it is the degree to which the knowledge is absorbed that influences actions which determines level. It is a cycle: when the soul becomes more purified it becomes more receptive to accepting knowledge and more able to manifest that knowledge in good action and the more knowledgeable and good-acting it becomes, the purer it becomes.

Only after extensive study and research about the spirituality of the soul, after a correct understanding of the fundamental tenets of faith, after training your character in virtue and good deeds, should one attempt to study the highest *ilm*. The human being cannot comprehend the wisdom and reason (*hikmat*) behind the workings of this world except after going through such training. One who does not progress step by step in the prescribed order, comprehending each level before moving on to the next will not be able to correctly grasp the intricacies of knowledge and is likely to have a flawed understanding and false doctrines of faith (*tasawurrat*). While for trained scholars the higher knowledge reinforces

faith and increases love for the hereafter, for the unprepared, instead of leading to greater clarity and conviction, the higher knowledge will create doubts, perplexities and fallacies.

The *Ikhwan us Safa* give the analogy of light in order to illustrate the possible adverse effects of *ilm* if given to the unprepared. Light provides vision and guidance. For a person who has his eyes open and good strong eyesight, light will allow him to see and increase his vision. On the other hand, light will not help someone who does not open his eyes, or someone who is blind, to see; if someone has defective eyesight, light may even decrease his vision, or suspend it altogether. Moreover, if someone emerges suddenly from a dark place into a brightly lighted place, the bright light will blind him rather than help him to see.

The Secrecy of Higher Knowledge and the Concept of Permission (Raza)

The concept of the secrecy and safeguarding of *ilm* is very important in *Dawat*. Since Rasulullah SA was sent to all of humankind and not just the elite or the learned, the Quran has different levels of meaning each suited to a particular grade of people, according to their intelligence and their understanding and knowledge of the Quran. Each person is addressed by and gets from the Quran that which corresponds with their level of intellect and training in knowledge. For instance, in the visualization of *jannat*, people who only know the *ẓāahir* will visualize it as a garden with fruit-laden trees and streams, on a purely physical level, while those at a higher level of knowledge look past the physical to the spiritual delights. In the same way, one question can have many different answers according to the level of the student. That is why, since the levels of understanding differ, the deeper meanings of the Quran lie beneath the surface and are not mentioned openly.

These mysteries and secrets have only been revealed to His *Anliya* by Allah. Only those who pursue and rise in the levels of knowledge as stipulated are given access to *taweel* and *haqeeqat*; others would not only be unable to comprehend the higher *ilm* correctly, it may adversely affect their basic system of belief (*aqeeda*). This higher knowledge also has to be kept safe from those who would distort and misrepresent it to mislead people.

It is from this that the concept of permission (to study *ilm* - *raẓa*) in *Dawat* follows. The Master of the Age (*Sahib uz Zaman*) – *Nabi, Wasi* or *Imam* – is the guardian (*haami* - *maalik*) of this *ilm*, and he has been given by Allah the right to grant or withhold at his discretion. In seclusion (*satr*), when the Imam is in seclusion, the Dai holds the key to the treasure of *ilm* of *Aale Mohammad*; he can give and withhold from whom he wants.

*These are Our bounties, bestow them (on others)
or withhold them, as per (your own) discretion.*

هَذَا عَطَاؤُنَا فَامْنُنْ أَوْ أَمْسِكْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

Quran 38:39

Raza of the *Imam* and in his *satr* the *Dai* is required to read and learn any *Dawat kitaab*, from *zaahir* to *taweel* and finally the *haqeeqat*. *Dawat* doctrine says that if a *kitaab* is read without *raza* its true import will not be understood and it will not give benefit of any kind; in fact, it will do the opposite. The *raza* system also ideally ensures that a tutor who is qualified to impart this knowledge in its true sense and spirit is given the responsibility of teaching.

The *ilm* of *Dawat* is illumination and healing (*jila'* and *shifa'*) and light and radiance (*noor* and *diya'*), if studied by the worthy with *raza*. On the other hand, if studied by the unworthy or without permission, the medicine would be instead a poison, it would destroy instead of healing, lead to death and damnation instead of life and salvation. *Ilm* is like an antidote – serum or vaccine (*tiryaaq*), for example – which is itself one thing but its effects change in different situations: the reaction it elicits or the result it produces may be completely opposite in two different situations.

The *ilm* of the *Dawat* is an entrustment (*amanat*), which should be protected, cared for and fulfilled, by only reading or learning with *raza*, and by not teaching it to or making it accessible to the unworthy, and by not withholding it from the worthy, the rightly-guided seeker of knowledge, the good person who sees with eyes of *baseerat* and whose goal is the *aakherat*.

Do not offer <i>ilm</i> and <i>bikmat</i> to the unworthy, because that would be wasting the <i>bikmat</i> , and do not withhold it from the worthy, because that would be unfair to them.	لا تضع الحكمة وتضيع عند غير اهلها ولا تمنعها وتظلمها
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Conclusion: The Garden of Knowledge

The author of the *Rasail* likens himself to the owner of a lush luxuriant garden who, due to generosity and nobility, invites deserving people, lovers of knowledge and seekers of salvation, to enter his garden and delight in its splendours, partake of its delicious fruits, smell its scented fragrances, and sit under the shade of its trees. No one pays heed to him, being either sceptical or ignorant. In order to overcome this unwillingness, the owner stands at the gate of his garden, and displays samples of the garden's splendours to the passers-by. After tasting its fruits, and inhaling the perfumes of its flowers, and listening the songs of its birds, some of these passers-by are excited and eager to enter the garden and experience its glories.

The *Ikhwan us Safa* describe the type of person they want their *Rasail* to be made accessible to: he should be rightly-guided, his ultimate goal should be the freedom and salvation of his soul: he should practice asceticism and not crave worldly things; he should strive to the

utmost to do good deeds which will earn him his salvation; he should not justify his biases and shortcomings; he should be dedicated to finding the Truth. To such people the owner says:

<i>“enter the garden and eat whatever you wish to, smell whatever you want to, see whatever you desire to, choose whatever you prefer, and rest where you feel like, come and go where ever you fancy, enjoy, take pleasure, relax and breathe..”</i>	أَدْخُلِ الْبُسْتَانَ، كُلْ مَا شِئْتَ، وَشَمِّ مَا شِئْتَ، وَاخْتَرِ مَا شِئْتَ، وَانْظُرْ كَيْفَ شِئْتَ، وَتَنَزَّهْ أَيْنَ شِئْتَ، وَجِءْ مِنْ أَيْنَ شِئْتَ، وَتَلَذَّذْ وَتَنَعَّمْ وَتَطْيِّبْ وَتَنَسِّمْ
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