



“Seek Knowledge Even Unto China”: The importance of learning in Islamic Spirituality
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Today, we will seek to understand how, in the Islamic tradition, science and spirituality are part of a single quest for Truth. Indeed, we can say that the Islamic path is founded on the search for knowledge in all its forms.

"We begin with a famous exhortation, often attributed to the Prophetic tradition: 'Seek knowledge even as far as China.'

أَطْلُبُوا الْعِلْمَ وَلَوْ بِالصِّينِ

This phrase, regardless of its technical classification in the sciences of hadith, carries a powerful meaning: the pursuit of knowledge has no geographical boundaries and no cultural barriers. As a Hadith reported by Ibn Majah reminds us: 'The pursuit of knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim.'

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ

It is not a hobby; it is not a pastime for intellectuals. It is a spiritual duty that defines the believer's identity. It is an 'uncomfortable' quest, one that pushes us to step outside our comfort zone."

The Dimensions of Knowledge
1. 'Ilm – Science and Knowledge

We begin with the word 'Ilm. We usually translate it as 'science' or 'knowledge.' From its linguistic root, '-l-m, it means 'to mark,' 'to distinguish,' or 'to make clear.' From this root derive words like 'alāma (sign) and 'alam (world). In Islam, the world is a collection of signs pointing to the Creator. Allah Himself is al-'Alīm, the All-Knowing. This word appears in the Quran hundreds of times because Islam is a faith based on knowledge.

Note: In this tradition, authority is not centralized in a single religious figure but is distributed among the Ulema—scholars and scientists in all fields of knowledge.

The Quran poses a powerful rhetorical question in Surah Az-Zumar: "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?"

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

The implicit answer is no. One who possesses authentic knowledge ('ilm) does not simply have more information; they occupy a higher spiritual state.

2. Ma'rifa – Experiential Gnosis

Accumulating data is not enough. Here we enter the concept of Ma'rifa. If 'Ilm is conceptual knowledge ("I know fire burns because I read about it"), Ma'rifa is experiential knowledge ("I know fire burns because I feel its heat"). It is the transition from the mind to the heart. The goal is not to have a database of information about God, but to reach an intimate recognition of God (Ma'rifat Allah) through inner purification. It is to "become what you know."

3. Hikma – Wisdom

The third pillar is Hikma, or wisdom. The Quran says: "He grants wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been granted wisdom has certainly been given a great good."

يُؤْتِي الْحِكْمَةَ مَنْ يَشَاءُ، وَمَنْ يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا

The difference? Science is knowing the mechanisms; wisdom is the ability to put every piece of knowledge in its right place. The root of wisdom is Taqwa (God-consciousness). Without Taqwa, science can become destructive—think of the atomic bomb: great science, zero wisdom.

4. Fiqh – Deep Understanding

Today, Fiqh is often used only for jurisprudence (rules), but the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "To whomever Allah wishes good, He grants a deep understanding (yufaqqihhu) of religion."

مَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ بِهِ خَيْرًا يُفَقِّهْهُ فِي الدِّينِ

Linguistically, Fiqh means penetrating the essence of things. It is not the mechanical memorization of "halal or haram" rules; it is the ability to grasp the internal coherence of reality and revelation.

5. Basira – Spiritual Intuition

Finally, we have Basira. Surah Yusuf 108, "I invite to Allah with insight (basira)."

قُلْ هُدَى سَبِيلِي أَدْعُو إِلَى اللَّهِ عَلَى بَصِيرَةٍ

In Arabic we have two beautiful word to say 'sight': Basar physical sight and Basira (the vision of the heart and both are important to know the world on a physical and metaphysical level. Basira is the spiritual intuition that allows us to connect empirical data to the ultimate goal: God. Without it, we see the world but fail to understand its meaning.

The Constellation of Knowledge (Synthesis)

These elements form an inseparable unity of rationality, interiority, and transcendence:

'Ilm: Objective science.

Ma'rifa: Inner experience.

Hikma: Operational wisdom.

Fiqh: Deep understanding.

Basira: Vision of the heart.

The Path and Ethics

Talab al-'Ilm – The Quest

How is this achieved? Through Talab al-'Ilm, the path of seeking. The Prophet said: "Whoever follows a path seeking knowledge, Allah will make easy for him a path to Paradise."

مَنْ سَلَكَ طَرِيقًا يَلْتَمِسُ فِيهِ عِلْمًا، سَهَّلَ اللَّهُ لَهُ بِهِ طَرِيقًا إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ

Note the verb "follows/traverses" (salaka). It requires movement and effort. It is a real Jihad against ignorance and laziness. In fact, the word for student (talib/taliba) comes from the verb "to seek" or "to demand." A student is one who asks questions in search of something that can never be fully exhausted.

Adam and the Names

This quest is written in our spiritual DNA. In the Quran, when Allah creates Adam, He "taught Adam the names of all things."

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا

This is crucial. Adam received the capacity to name, classify, and master reality through language and concepts—a knowledge even the angels did not possess. Adam is the first researcher. Seeking knowledge is part of our Fitra (primordial nature).

Niyya – Intention

The power of knowledge requires ethical control. This is where Niyya (intention) comes in. The famous hadith "Actions are judged by intentions" applies primarily to study. Do I study for vanity? To win debates? For power? A sincere niyya is to seek the "Face of Allah" and serve the community. Without ethics, knowledge is hollow.

'Ilm Nafi – Useful Knowledge

The Prophet always prayed: "O Allah, I ask You for useful knowledge ('Ilm Nafi)."

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَسْأَلُكَ عِلْمًا نَافِعًا، وَرِزْقًا طَيِّبًا، وَعَمَلًا مُنْتَفِعًا

Not all knowledge is equal; some is just "noise." Useful knowledge:

Benefits the individual and society.

Draws one closer to God.

Produces real transformation and concrete actions.

The Scholar's Ink and the First Command

There is a suggestive saying: "The ink of the scholar is holier than the blood of the martyr."

مِزَابُ الْعُلَمَاءِ أَفْضَلُ مِنْ دِمَاءِ الشُّهَدَاءِ

While some scholars debate its chain of transmission, its meaning is confirmed by authentic hadiths stating: "Scholars are the heirs of the Prophets."

إِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ

The martyr defends the faith physically in a moment, but the scholar preserves the life of the community for generations.

Knowledge as 'Ibada (Worship)

In this paradigm, studying is praying. The scientist's laboratory and the student's library are as sacred as the mosque if lived with the right intention. Islam was born with a command to literacy: the first word revealed was not "Pray" or "Fast," but Iqra! (Read!).

Conclusion: A Unitary Paradigm

Islam proposes a unitary paradigm. We have Empirical Science (reading the Book of Creation/the Universe) and Quranic Revelation (reading the Word of God). They are not in conflict; they are convergent tracks leading toward the Oneness of God (Tawhid).

To truly seek the Truth, we must integrate the Mind and the Heart. Let us never stop being students, finally uniting science, spirituality, and responsibility.

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