

Mysticism: Relationship between Knowledge and Action with Special Reference to Kashf Al Mahjub

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Abstract

Action without true knowledge is of no benefit. This interconnected relationship of knowledge and action has a great influence on life. This paper endeavors to bring into light the unity of knowledge and action under the domain of mysticism with special focus on Ali Hujwiri's most celebrated book Kashf al Mahjub. There is a global blow of fear and terror and it seems almost impossible to reduce the gap between two extremes in such a technical and scientific age. Mysticism however could be taken as a beam of hope which can pave the way towards peace. Ali Hujwiri emphasizes to consider only those as true Sufis who balance out their relation with this world and with God at the same time.

Keywords: Mysticism, Knowledge, Kashf Al Mahjub

God has sent man to the earth as His vicegerent. The angels and *Jinn* were present before the creation of man but it was Adam who got selected for the vice-gerency of his creator.

Man is superior to other creations because he was dowered with the 'Knowledge of the things'.

"And He imparted unto Adam the names of all things; then He brought them within the ken of the angels and said: "Declare unto Me the names of these [things], if what you say is true. They replied: Limitless art Thou in Thy glory! No knowledge have we save that which Thou hast imparted unto us. Verily, Thou alone art all knowing, truly wise."¹

The importance of knowledge in life of a human being can be easily predicted when we see man equipped with reason, choice, freedom of will and action. The philosophical inquiry of knowledge is known as epistemology which undertakes a detailed

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and critical study of the sources of knowledge and distinguishes between truth and falsity and paves the way towards the proper understanding of reality. It deals with the following questions: what can we know? How can we know? Is knowledge possible? Is there any certain knowledge? etc. It is observed that differences in various approaches are due to disagreement between the sources of knowledge. Rationalists believe that knowledge can be obtained only through reason while empiricists claim that the sole source of knowledge is sense perception.

There is a close relationship between knowledge and action. It could be understood as a bird's two wings. They are interrelated in such a way that both complement each other. Knowledge without action is just like a mind having new ideas but of no use. Due to this inherent relationship between the two, today we are able to knock at the door of new scientific inquiries. On the other hand in mysticism proximity between knowledge and action can be seen. It is further maintained that there are however two aspects of this relationship. One approach is to involve in self and divine, leaving all other things behind while in second approach teachings of a mystic greatly affect the society as a whole. Our concern is to look into the relationship between knowledge and action in general and with special reference to a great mystic of South Asia, Ali Hujwiri's (d.1063) *Kashf al Mahjoob* in particular. Before entering into the pool of discussion, we should get acquainted with the terms *Sufism* and *Sufi*. The word mysticism has its roots in the Greek language in which its meaning is 'to conceal'. Afterwards this word is delineated by the word '*Sufi*' in Islamic mysticism (*Tasawwuf*). We can trace out various roots of this word in history which are as under:

- *Suffa* means a 'raised platform'. Usually it is referred to *As'hab-e-Suffa*, the people who used to sit on raised platform in the Prophet's Mosque and remained busy all the time in meditation, remembrance of God and offering prayers.
- *Saffa* means 'cleanliness and purity'. This referred to the people who focus on the cleanliness of heart and purity of soul. Ali Hujwiri favors this definition of the word Sufi.
- *Saff* which means 'row'. Sufis are the people who are taken as the people of the top rank or it is also thought that due to their careful attitude towards the prayer they always preferred to occupy the first row.
- There is another opinion that this word has been derived from *Sophists*-a Greek school of thought who was of the

view that man is the measure of all things instead of any objective reference. Sufis also claim that it is man's self which leads towards truth.

- *Suf* means wool. This is most widely accepted definition among Eastern and Western scholars. In the history sufis used to wear woolen dress in order to remain simple and modest.
- A Greek word '*Sophia*' means wisdom (reason) which is a source of knowledge. This source could be used to get knowledge of God. Thus it seems relevant that the word 'Sufi' may have the roots in the word '*Sophia*'.

Mystics believe in the existence of realities which are not accessible by sense perception or intellectual apprehensions rather they are directly accessible to subjective experience (mystical experience).

In order to understand the term mystical experience we can divide it into two types which may be called 'the mysticism of love and union' and 'the mysticism of knowledge and understanding'. There is a strong link between the two types. In first type the distinction lies between the two urges. First urge is to live in solitude and complete dedication towards selfhood, while second urge is related with the escape from loneliness and separation. This ultimately entails a relationship of self with society and God. Consequently, this relationship diverts the focus of man towards a higher urge i.e. Nature or God and this is the stage where we may see a reunion between man and God. Here it is worth mentioning that urge of self-love and the urge of God's love are always at war within man. The selfhood of man pulls him towards itself while at the same time man has an intrinsic desire to reunite with the One to whom he belongs.

The main thesis of mysticism is that man has equal share in the divine life and in Iqbal's words God becomes a co-worker with him.² Although man has been sent in a spatiotemporal world but actually he is a resident of non-spatio-non-temporal world. Therefore, it is his natural desire to move towards the source to which he belongs. The mysticism of love and union is not only man approaching God rather it is equally God approaching man. Hence, we can say that it acts as a reciprocal and mutual relationship. St. Augustine says: "Thou has made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."³ The second type of mystical experience i.e. mysticism of knowledge and understanding is very important. As it is already

described in the above discussion that there is a strong link between the two types of mystical experiences therefore when a person successfully achieves an escape from the love of selfhood and reunites with God then his next urge comes which is to know the secret of the cosmos and to determine the purpose of his creation. In order to know the secret of universe, he tries to gain the knowledge of the realities of things. He sets a goal to develop an understanding of the universe as a whole instead of parts. Dr Mir Valiuddin has explained it in such words:

“The Sufi who is conversant with the Knowledge of Nearness knows the secret of the relation between Haqq and Khalq, God and the phenomenal things, the secret of nearness and proximity, immanence and transcendence, Firstness and Lastness, Outwardness and Inwardness of God with the phenomenal things.”^A

A philosopher also tries to dig out the knowledge of the realities by conceptual arguments but a mystic, on the other hand, approaches the realities by intuitive method instead of deductive reasoning. Through the direct intuitive experience he becomes able to find out not only the coherent pattern but a sort of certainty as well.

Apart from direct intuitive experience there is another important factor which enters in mysticism and that is ‘salvation’. The knowledge gained as a result of mystical or intuitive experience has a saving characteristic which leads to eternal life. Here it is important to mention that there is a lot of criticism on the ‘mystical experience’. Critics find difficult to consider it an authentic source of knowledge and one of the major objections is that there could be no intellectual interpretation of this source of knowledge. However, the purpose of this article is not to go deep into the epistemological debates we actually want to concentrate on the teachings of mysticism and its impact on the society.

A *Sufi* is Islamic mystic who considers himself as the guardian of the Divine Mysteries. The source of knowledge towards the Divine Mysteries is not theoretical intellect and reasoning rather self purification which requires an inner intuitive insight (*Basirah*). This inner intuitive insight provides a mystic with Godly knowledge and the divine love. A common man develops an ordinary relation with God in which the element of fear is more dominant than love but a *Sufi* develops a relationship with God on the basis of love. In this way he pursues the path of God contentedly and he never gets disappointed. Due to his strong

connection of love, he succeeds in understanding the Eternal Reality. In Burckhardt's words:

*"Love is higher than fear even as knowledge is higher than love, but this is true only of direct, immediate knowledge which outstrips, reason (or discursive thought), for spiritual love embraces every individual faculty and imprints each of them with the seal of Unity."*⁵

Religiousness, spirituality and mystic experience may be central to the development of wisdom and could be enhanced by focusing on values and ideals. They facilitate a moral and human understanding by reminding an individual his significance in this universe. The fear of God is often misinterpreted. It is fear of God which is taken as to be afraid of God and that is why people find it hard to develop a lover-Beloved relationship. This point is beautifully explained by Abdul Khaliq who elaborates in his book *Problems of Muslim Mysticism* in these words:

*The stipulation involved here is not that one should be afraid of God. The concept rather simply means that one should be afraid of the painful consequences of his own wrong-doings which, as promised by God, will definitely be worked out for him: God has taken upon Himself not to go against his own promise! If on the other hand, a person lives his life in subservience to God's will as he should, there is absolutely no occasion to fear Him."*⁶

To love and to promote love is included in the basic teachings of Sufis. It is the love of God which reminds man of his religious teachings i.e. not to indulge in anger, hatred, oppression, injustice and intolerance. When man enjoys blessings of God and offer his gratitude (*Shukr*) to God, is a form of love. When he realizes that with all sins which he has done, he is not insulted before others and a door of repentance (*Tauba*) is always open for a sinful person; a feeling of love of God arises. In fact, the love for God reflects in their lives when they interact with others. Mysticism throughout the history has had great impact on establishing a peaceful society. Dhu al-Nun Misri says: "The sentiment of love for God ultimately unites man with God. Man is submerged in the being of God. His self does not remain his own but becomes a part and parcel of the self of God."⁷

The epistemology expounded in the *Kashf al Mahjub* has two fold approaches. It explains theory of knowledge as well as ontology which is the goal of all fabrication of knowledge. The great mystic explains: nature, kinds, sources, objectives, ways of acquiring knowledge and its relation to practical life and human

actions. Regarding the nature and vastness of knowledge, he clearly accepts that it has innumerable fields and branches and none can be able to gain all but he emphasizes on acquiring sufficient acquaintance about the fields which are necessary and useful for life and cites a Hadith that for every Muslim man and woman it is mandatory to seek knowledge even if one has to go to China (Which was the most difficult area to reach from Arab at that time).

“Can they who know and they who do not know be deemed equal?”⁸

“But [always] say: “O my Sustainer, cause me to grow in knowledge!”⁹

So in Hujwiri’s view knowledge is obligatory and it is a pre-requisite for acting rightly, yet he points out that it is easy for human being to walk on the fire than to follow the road to knowledge.

After clarifying two aspects of epistemology viz. knowledge and action he points out two groups. The first is that which gives much importance to knowledge while absolutely ignoring action; others give importance to action even at the toll of knowledge. But in the epistemology of a true Sufi both groups are wrong. His theory of knowledge encompasses not only theoretical knowledge but also actions in this terrestrial world on one hand, and reward in the hereafter on the other hand so one can find his theory of knowledge more comprehensive than the western theories. His words are:

“Unless action is combined with knowledge, it is not deserving of recompense Prayer, for instance, is not really prayer, unless performed with knowledge of the principles of purification and those which concern the qibla, and with knowledge of the nature of intention. Similarly, knowledge without action is not knowledge.”¹⁰

Iqbal by strengthening the relationship between knowledge and action uttered a historical sentence in the preface of his book *The Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam*. He says: “The Quran is a book which emphasizes deed rather than idea.”¹¹

Ali Hujwiri here refers to the two aspects of mysticism. One is practical aspect in which Sufi completes his spiritual journey towards God and other is theoretical aspect in which he presents the logical theories regarding God, universe and man. In this way a Sufi does not possess any conflict between the

theoretical and practical approaches. Considering both the worlds he naturally divides knowledge into categories viz. The Divine knowledge and the Human knowledge and prefers the former and considers the latter worthless because the Divine knowledge is His own attribute, subsisting in himself, and His attributes are infinite. The human knowledge is inferior because it is human attribute and belongs to human who are finite so this attribute is also finite.

Ali Hujwiri draws the attention towards the point that when one leaves the path of God he diverts himself from the true means of knowledge so as a consequence he betrays himself from the path of truth and lives aimlessly in the world of ignorance. He lays stress on the authenticity of the Divine knowledge and further elaborates that the former encircles all the existent as well as non-existent and God knows what is 'knowable' and 'unknowable' to man. The human knowledge is only comprehension and investigation of the existent and known objects which can make a person only wise. Resultantly, human beings should aspire, contemplate and struggle to understand the rest, keeping in mind that God is seeing him what a person is doing.

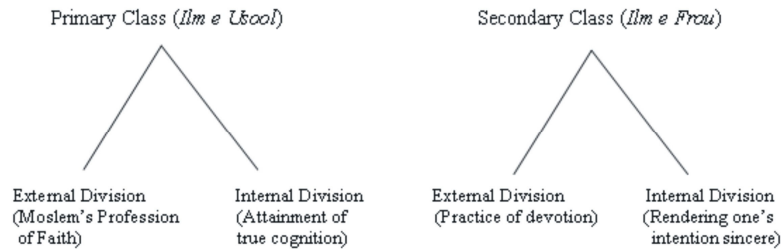
Here a question arises that knowledge is much vast and there are large number of branches with innumerable sub-branches so which one should be focused or acquired and to what extent. He referred to Hatim al-Asamm and explains four points to be focused on knowledge for living a good life by keeping in background the dual aspects of his epistemology. They are: firstly to believe that whatever has been assigned to a person that cannot be enhanced or snatched or decreased by anyone else. Secondly, whatever one is bound to pay, no other person can pay instead of him. Thirdly, Death is an inescapable reality so one should be prepared to face it. Fourthly, God is ever and all-observing. So these four points symbolically determine the course and provide ethical code to live a life here keeping in focus the life after life.

According to Ali Hujwiri main objective of human knowledge should be to know God and His commandments. Along with this knowledge of time (*ilm-i waqt*) is equally important and this concept of time is different from that of general. The Outward and the Inward circumstances depend on time which affects in two ways; primary and secondary. The first demands from a Muslim the profession of faith and practice with devotion, while the latter requires recognition with sincere intention. In his words:

“The outward and inward aspects cannot be divorced. The exoteric aspect of the truth without the esoteric aspect is hypocrisy, and the esoteric without the exoteric is heresy. So

with regard to the law, mere formality is defective, while mere spirituality is vain.”¹²

The diagrammatic presentation of two divisions of knowledge is as follows:



The knowledge of the reality (God) and the commandments of God (*Shariah*) are necessarily interlinked. We should have the knowledge of the former with its aspects of the unity and essence of God, His attributes and actions and His wisdom and the knowledge of the *Shariah* which includes The *Quran*, *Sunnah* and *Consensus*. The knowledge of the above affects a person's physical as well as spiritual life. Having described his epistemology and its dual effect on human actions in social life along with the afterlife and salvation, he discusses such groups who deny the possibility of knowledge i.e. the Sophists and the Heretics. He criticizes their theories about the impossibility of knowledge and says that negation of knowledge must be the result of knowledge or ignorance and denial of knowledge by knowledge is also knowledge but denial of knowledge by ignorance is infidelity and falsehood.

Ali Hujwiri ends his discussion on the point that knowledge is life and faith is light and they save human from darkness of infidelity. He suggests avoiding the company of the heedless savants, hypocritical Quran-readers and ignorant pretenders of Sufism.¹³ He says: "The hearts of infidels are dead, because they are ignorant of God, and the hearts of the heedless are sick, because they are ignorant of His Commandments."¹⁴ In the last Ali Hujwiri professes that "It is more easy for human nature to walk on fire than to follow the road of Knowledge".¹⁵ Ali Hujwiri narrates Abu Yazid Bistami's words which are: "I strove in the spiritual combat for thirty years, and I found nothing harder to me than knowledge and its pursuits".¹⁶ It is interesting to note that just like Socrates; Ali Hujwiri regards that person more wise who do not claim to know. In Hujwiri's words: "You must know enough to

know that you do not know.”¹⁷ Socrates in Apology says: “I am wiser than he is to this extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.”¹⁸

From the above discussion it can be deduced that mysticism is a path which leads towards ultimate truth. This ultimate truth can have different names and forms. There is one unique ultimate spiritual reality which exists and remains true though the mankind approaches it from various directions. The ultimate goal of all religions, science, and philosophy is to find out the reality and in their search they use their own paths but all the paths ultimately reach the same reality, which is the destination of all of them.

Intuition is a source in which one has direct apprehension of knowledge. We know such statements in mystic knowledge as ‘direct insight into certainty and truth’. Knowledge of one’s self is first step while travelling on the path which leads to ultimate truth. “He who recognizes his own self, recognizes God.”¹⁹ Mystic and Sufi first adopt the way of self recognition to reach the certain truth and get close with the ultimate reality. All the guides of all mystics of religions claim that they get a deep insight into the religion and moral truths. When a mystic gets this insight, God Himself awards him with the blessings of love. This is a way, a path of love with God and He does not use these blessings for his own self as for attaining a good repute. He comes to his fellow men and renders a great service to them by serving religion and community. He believes in one reality and preaches the message of love and brotherhood, generosity and large heartedness. The basic ingredients of mysticism are adoration, love of God, purification of heart and righteousness.

Humanity today is divided into many camps and might collapse if an attempt to develop a sense of cohesion and mutual understanding will not be made. Unfortunately, we are living in a state of constant tension and fear. Everybody and each country is looking towards others as enemy of each other. In present situation one will find exploitation, depersonalization and dehumanization. An atmosphere of brutality, injustice and enslavement is prevailing all over the so called civilized world. Today, world is war-torn and war-afflicted world. Man has gained lots of progress in science and technology but he has failed to learn a human lesson of living together, that is to say good-neighborhood or of being with. The present stock of deadly weapons and atom bombs are more than enough to wipeout this world in one instant. We are facing a very strong enemy whose name is terrorism. This term was very much

unfamiliar to us for some years back but now this has so much usage in our daily life.

A fresh orientation of unity and love is the dire need of the time. If we are ready to accommodate others and willing to recognize their place along with us, there will be synthesis and the conflicts could be over thrown. Men should show by their actions that they believe in the concept of that 'the whole world is the family of God'. There is a silver lining beneath every cloud; in this sense mysticism is a ray of hope. Mystics are the people who care for the eternal values and preach the lesson of purity of heart and mind. They are the people who go through a devotion and training to get associated with God. As soon as a Sufi or mystic cleans his heart from all worldly diseases, the love of God occupy the empty house. Now the heart becomes the residence of love. He enjoys ecstasy and keeps on inspiring his fellow men for sacrifices and commitment to serve humanity without noticing whether the other person is a Muslim, Hindu, a Buddhist or a follower of any other religion. Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Siraj-ud-Din) maintains that "All mysticisms are equally universal in the greater sense in that they all lead to the One Truth."²⁰ Sufi belonging to any religion has a specific view point which cultivates the barren land of the hearts. Islam teaches the lesson of universal brotherhood and equality; Christianity teaches love and sacrifice. Judaism emphasizes the value of spiritual wisdom and tradition. Buddhism advocates sympathy and mindfulness while Vedanta or Hindu tradition stresses the oneness of all religions. They are harmless people, spreading the message of love for all and they attain spiritual perfection by serving other fellow beings.²¹

In short mysticism is an activity more inspirational, more meaningful and more rewarding than any other activity. This can be meaningful only when there is a harmonious relationship between knowledge and action as Ali Hujwiri emphasizes that when a person acquires knowledge and gets perfection in that knowledge, reality is revealed to him. Perfection in the knowledge could only be gained through action and practice. Thus, mysticism can be exercised as a binding force among the fellowmen of this world.

Notes & References

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