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A SUFI-PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF AZIZUDDIN NASAFI'S IDEAS ON KNOWLEDGE AND ITS ACQUISITION

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Annotation

This article presents a comprehensive mystical-philosophical analysis of the views on knowledge ('ilm) and its acquisition by Azizuddin Nasafi, a prominent 13th-century Central Asian Sufi thinker. Framing knowledge not merely as theoretical information but as a foundational metaphysical force defining human ontology and spiritual perfection, the study explores its roots in Islamic theology and Sufi epistemology. Analyzing Nasafi's core treatises-Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil, Zubdat al-Haqaiq, Bayan ut-Tanzil, and Maqsad al-Aqsa-the paper examines the fundamental distinction between acquired rational knowledge ('ilm al-kasbi) and direct divine knowledge ('ilm al-ladunni). The author highlights Nasafi's classification of rational, traditional, and mystical sciences, his validation of natural science as a path to divine wisdom, and the epistemological hierarchy of certainty ('Ilm al-Yaqin, 'Ayn al-Yaqin, and Haqq al-Yaqin). Furthermore, the study emphasizes the indispensable balance between knowledge and action ('ilm va 'amal), the role of spiritual mentorship (murshid and salik), and heart purification (tazkiya). Ultimately, Nasafi's synthesis of reason and gnosis offers a timeless model for human development and intellectual-spiritual harmony.

Keywords: Azizuddin Nasafi, Sufi Epistemology, Acquired Knowledge, Direct Divine Knowledge, Ilm al-Ladunni, Heart Purification, Insan al-Kamil, Knowledge and Action, Spiritual Mentorship, Islamic Philosophy.



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Introduction

In Islamic teachings and the Sufi worldview, the significance of knowledge ('ilm) and its acquisition is not merely a matter of collecting intellectual-theoretical information. Rather, it constitutes the central foundation that defines human ontology, the purpose of creation, and man's metaphysical status. The starting point of Islamic epistemology lies in the very first revelation-the command "Iqra!" ("Read!"), which entrusts humanity with the solemn responsibility of comprehending existence and the Creator as both Cause and Ultimate Reality. In the Holy Qur'an, the elevation of those with knowledge above the ignorant and divine invocations such as "My Lord, increase me in knowledge" establish the pursuit of knowledge as an infinite and continuous spiritual quest.

The fundamental essence of knowledge in Islamic doctrine traces back to one of the Divine Attributes-Al-'Alim (The All-Knowing). Man's distinction above all created beings by the Creator and the teaching of "all the names" to Adam (Asma 'allama) are directly linked to his unique capacity to receive and process knowledge. Consequently, within the Islamic intellectual tradition-particularly in kalam (theology) and philosophy-knowledge serves as the primary criterion for human reason to comprehend physical and metaphysical laws, contemplate sacred precepts, and discern truth from falsehood. However, while rational and traditional sciences assist in understanding the exoteric (zahir) dimension of existence, they cannot fully unveil its esoteric (batin) essence. At this juncture, Sufism and gnosis (irfan) emerge as the highest expressions of Islamic thought. In Sufi doctrine, the concept of knowledge and its attainment ascends to a profoundly new metaphysical plane. Prominent thinkers such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Ibn 'Arabi, and Azizuddin Nasafi categorize knowledge into two major streams:



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1. **'Ilm al-Kasbi (Acquired Knowledge):** Knowledge obtained through formal education, reading, and logical reasoning.

2. **'Ilm al-Ladunni (Direct Divine Knowledge):** Gnostic knowledge poured directly into the heart from the Divine Presence without intermediary means.

According to Sufi analysis, acquired knowledge serves as a foundational instrument that introduces individuals to sacred law (sharia) and sharpens the mind. Yet, the ultimate objective remains Ma'rifatullah (Gnosis of God) and the attainment of 'Ilm al-Ladunni. Acquiring this divine wisdom requires far more than reading books or formulating logical arguments.

The primary mechanism for attaining knowledge in Sufi epistemology is the purification of the heart (tazkiyat an-nafs) and cleansing the inner spiritual realm from external worldly forms. Mystics compare the heart to a mirror: when cleansed from worldly attachments, passions, pride, and envy, it reflects the true forms of all existence and Divine Epiphanies. As Nasafi emphasizes, in acquired knowledge, reasoning moves from the outside inward, leaving room for error; in ladunni and gnostic knowledge, meaning flows from the inside outward. In this process, the organ of cognition shifts from theoretical reason to the heart (the mirror of the heart) and the secret (sirr).

Simultaneously, Islamic and Sufi traditions interpret knowledge and action ('ilm va 'amal) as an indivisible unity. Maxims such as "Knowledge without action is like a tree without fruit" or "a donkey laden with books" illustrate that the value of knowledge manifests only when applied in practice, morality, and faith. The primary purpose of acquiring knowledge is to liberate man from base animalistic desires and elevate him to the status of Insan al-Kamil (The Perfect Man). For mystics, a man of knowledge ('arif/ scholar) is not merely an information holder, but a spiritual guide embodying high morality, humility, justice, and humanism.



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In Islamic and Sufi teachings, acquiring knowledge is not simply a means to achieve worldly gains or status. It is the absolute spiritual-metaphysical path through which man fulfills his Divine Covenant, realizes his inner essence and Creator, and reaches perfection via the harmony of reason and heart.

Main Analysis: Azizuddin Nasafi's Epistemology of Knowledge

Azizuddin Nasafi's concept of knowledge and its acquisition occupies a central position in 13th-century Transoxiana thought, situated at the intersection of Islamic philosophy, kalam, and Sufism. Living and writing during a period of complex socio-political and spiritual crisis following the Mongol conquests, Nasafi interpreted knowledge as the single, absolute, and indispensable factor for human perfection, unlocking the mysteries of existence, and achieving societal spiritual renewal. In his fundamental treatises-Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil, Zubdat al-Haqaiq, Bayan ut-Tanzil, and Maqсад al-Aqsa-he comprehensively analyzes the essence of knowledge, its classification, methodological stages, and the balance between knowledge and action.

Nasafi perceives knowledge not as a mere collection of theoretical facts or memorized rules, but as an illuminating metaphysical force that liberates human nature from base animalistic instincts and connects it with Divine Light. The central inquiry of his epistemology concerns the source of knowledge and the pathways to its acquisition. In Zubdat al-Haqaiq, Nasafi explores the dual pathways of cognition: 'ilm al-kasbi (knowledge acquired via rational and educational means) and 'ilm al-ladunni (irfani knowledge poured directly into the heart from the Divine Presence)[1.102-108]. According to Nasafi, 'ilm al-kasbi is achieved through instruction, repetition, and logical deduction (reason and proof). This knowledge is as vital as air and water for human survival in the physical world, understanding exoteric laws, and formulating logical conclusions.



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However, he notes that no matter how refined acquired knowledge becomes, it remains bound by time and space, lacking the capacity to fully unveil the ultimate truths of metaphysical reality.

Consequently, in *Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil*, Nasafi presents 'ilm al-ladunni as the supreme stage of knowledge acquisition[2.80-84]. He asserts that 'ilm al-ladunni is a divine light bestowed directly by God after an individual passes the stage of logical proofs and purifies his heart from spiritual rust and worldly desires. Here, Nasafi invokes the metaphor of the "mirror of the heart": once polished, the forms and meanings of all existence ('Alam al-Malakut and 'Alam al-Mulk) reflect directly within it. In Nasafi's doctrine, acquired knowledge and ladunni knowledge do not negate each other; rather, they are complementary. Acquired knowledge serves as the foundation and tool, while ladunni knowledge represents the ultimate objective and spiritual perfection.

Nasafi's classification of sciences is vividly displayed in *Bayan ut-Tanzil*[3.142-148]. He divides the prevailing sciences of the Islamic world into three primary categories:

- 1. Rational Sciences:** Philosophy, logic, natural sciences, and medicine.
- 2. Traditional/Religious Sciences:** Theology (kalam), jurisprudence (fiqh), traditions (hadith), and exegesis (tafsir).
- 3. Gnostic/Unveiled Sciences:** Sufism and the science of Ultimate Truth.

Unlike many dogmatic scholars of his era, Nasafi held no hostility toward philosophy or the natural sciences. On the contrary, as a physician-scholar and philosopher-mystic, he viewed studying nature, human anatomy, and physiology as essential prerequisites for understanding Divine Wisdom. Nasafi stressed that the natural world is a physical book of Divine Attributes and Names; studying it allows one to perceive the artistry of the Creator.



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In Maqсад al-Aqsa, the thinker outlines three metaphysical levels of knowledge acquisition[4.230-235]:

- **'Ilm al-Yaqin (Knowledge of Certainty):** Knowledge attained through hearing, instruction, and logical proof, where truth is comprehended externally.
- **'Ayn al-Yaqin (Eye of Certainty):** Direct observation of truth through gnostic unveiling (kashf) and the eye of the heart.
- **Haqq al-Yaqin (Truth of Certainty):** The stage where the distinction between knower and known dissolves, resulting in complete absorption into Ultimate Truth.

Nasafi demonstrates that a true scholar and seeker must not stop at 'Ilm al-Yaqin, but strive through heart purification and spiritual discipline toward 'Ayn al-Yaqin and Haqq al-Yaqin.

A central ethical principle in Nasafi's framework is the harmony between knowledge and action ('ilm va 'amal). In Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil, he compares knowledge without action to a fruitless tree or a sick person who understands the formulation of a medicine but fails to take it[2.89-94]. According to Nasafi, no matter how many books a person reads or theoretical concepts he masters, if that knowledge is not reflected in his character, truthfulness, and benefit to society, it merely instills pride, arrogance, and a spiritual burden. True knowledge must cultivate humility, justice, tolerance, and humanism.

Furthermore, Nasafi attaches great importance to the spiritual and intellectual relationship between the mentor (murshid) and the seeker (salik). He cautions that attempting to study gnostic and philosophical sciences independently without a guide leads to delusion, fantasy, and erroneous conclusions. A mentor is a guide who has traversed the path, embodies both knowledge and action, and can objectively assess the seeker's inner potential. In Bayan ut-Tanzil, Nasafi states that a mentor's duty is not to force the seeker to memorize ready-made



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information, but to awaken his inner potential and shield his heart from misguidance[7.178-185.].

Conclusion

In conclusion, Azizuddin Nasafi's views on knowledge and its acquisition are not mere moralistic sermons, but a holistic doctrine resting on solid ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations. By synthesizing rational and gnostic methods, he created a unique epistemological model guiding humanity toward intellectual and spiritual perfection. Nasafi's insights on knowledge, humanity, and enlightenment remain a valuable theoretical-philosophical resource for developing human capital, ensuring harmony between science and spirituality, and fostering the holistic development of the human personality today.

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