

The Concept of Knowledge in Rūmī's *Mathnawī*

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The definition of '*ilm*' or knowledge in Rūmī's *Mathnawī* is both the same and not the same as the definitions of science, knowledge, philosophy, theology or mysticism in dictionaries. In Rūmī's view, '*ilm*' is a concept which may partly include the meanings of these terms, but which is also different from all of them. In the historical tradition of Europe from mediæval to modern times, especially in the past two centuries with the establishment of modern academic institutions, we find specific definitions for these terms in scientific and scholarly works of reference, all of which are more or less different from Rūmī's definition of '*ilm*'.

The modern world of the twentieth and twenty-first century is justifiably proud of its progress in science, industry, technology and also in the modernization of education and in social relations. In many parts of the world there are modern facilities for life, and natural resources have been harnessed by man in the service of civilization. The spiritual side of existence, however, does seem to be ignored by modern man. Here I am not referring to the side effects of industrial and technological progress, nor of the contamination of the natural environment. Neither am I speaking of the discoveries and inventions which were and are used to create destructive weapons. Rather I am alluding to the fact that there is another way of learning and understanding through which we may attain peace and spiritual satisfaction. Our civilized world has an urgent need to find such a way and in this respect Rūmī may serve as a guide and a master in this quest, and his *Mathnawī* can enlighten the travelers

along this way. Rūmī's spiritual education opens a window upon an invisible school inside man's heart and upon the mysteries which are perceptible only through inner vision.

After many years of study at theological schools where he became well acquainted with the Koran, jurisprudence, prophetic traditions, Islamic philosophy and literature, Rūmī discovered that his scholastic knowledge did not fulfill his spiritual expectations. He realized that there is another pathway to revelation which is invisible to most scholastic scholars.

In a similar manner in our world today, one can list more than twenty famous books, all written and published in developed countries, most of them recognized as best-sellers, and all of which discuss, directly or indirectly, the problems of modern civilization. All of the writers concerned say or imply that over and above progress in science, technology and education, man needs a sense of spiritual elevation, or a power to direct this very progress toward humane, moral and spiritual satisfaction. But such an elevation is not accessible through sophisticated institutions of education and research.

Almost the same concept was frequently discussed by Rūmī more than seven hundred years ago. A very clear expression of his interest in the matter is a verse in the sixth volume of his *Mathnawī*:

*Though you believe in the accuracy of the scholastic knowledge,
it will not open your inner eyes to invisible existence*¹.

There are two main definitions for 'ilm in the *Mathnawī*: in one of them 'ilm is related to visible and material existence accessible through educational facilities. The other is not worldly, not taught in the schools and not accessible through books, laboratories or educational and academic facilities. This extraordinary 'ilm testifies to a comprehension of Truth lying beyond common human understanding, or an awareness of the invisible world which is the only

1. See Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī, *Mathnawī*, a critical edition by Dr. Muhammad Este'lami with an introduction, notes and indices; 6 vols. (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Zawwar 1370 A.Hsh./1991), M VI/263. In subsequent references to this text, "M" refers to the published text cited here, with Roman numerals referring to the *daftar* and Arabic numerals to its *bayt*.

real and eternal aspect of existence.

In the *Mathnawī* there are many tales and anecdotes by which Rūmī refers to the differences between the two concepts of 'ilm. Perhaps the most famous is the story of a conceited grammarian, a *naḥwī*, who embarked on a boat and asked the boatman: "Have you ever studied *naḥw* ('grammar')?" When the boatman said that he had never studied grammar, the *naḥwī* said to him: "O! I feel so sorry for you, half your life has gone for naught." The boatman did not answer immediately and kept silent for a while, until the wind cast the boat into a whirlpool. Then the boatman shouted: "Do you know how to swim?" The proud grammarian said that he would never be able to swim. The boatman said: "O *Naḥwī*! Your whole life has gone for naught, because the boat is sinking in this whirlpool." Following this anecdote, Rūmī says:

Here what is needed is self-effacement (maḥw), not grammar (naḥw).

*If you're effaced from self, then plunge into the sea,
and be not frightened of any peril or danger.²*

Being knowledgeable in any field of scholastic studies does not open a window to the invisible world. What is needed to achieve that end, is not *fiqh* or *ṣarf* or *naḥw*. We need the "jurisprudence of jurisprudence" (*fiqh-i fiqh*), the "morphology of morphology" (*ṣarf-i ṣarf*), and the "grammar of grammar" (*naḥw-i naḥw*). By these expressions, Rūmī means a knowledge which is received through a spiritual relation with the Divine world. Another expression for this relation is: a knowledge "from That Source" (*az ān sar*), that is, a knowledge which grows from a Divine root.³

Another expression for such awareness is *fath-i bāb az sīna*, or the opening of a gate in one's heart:

*Everyone in whose breast [or heart] the gate is opened
will behold the Sun from everywhere.⁴*

And for a man with a religious background, such a gate can be

2. M I/2853.

3. M III/1124.

4. M I/1409.

opened only by God. In this process, in Rūmī's view, a master, a *pīr* or *murshīd* must provide guidance and pave the way for disciples. In many verses of the *Mathnawī*, Solomon, the famous Jewish prophet and ruler, and also Noah are mentioned as masters, and in this comparison Rūmī implies that a *murshīd* must be obeyed as a prophet:

*With Solomon put your foot in the Sea, that the water, David-like, may make a hundred suits of mail [to protect you].
That Solomon is present to all, but if we do not deserve his guidance, our inward eyes will not be opened by him.*⁵

* * *

*Keep silent, so that you may hear from the speakers,
that which may not come into utterance or into explanation.
Keep silent, so that you may hear from the Sun
that which may not come in books or into allocution.
Keep silent, so that the Spirit may speak for you.
In the Ark of Noah leave off swimming.*⁶

To express the concept of that inward '*ilm*, or '*ilm-i bāṭin*, Rūmī uses many different words and expressions and in most cases, he uses the antonyms of the same words for worldly knowledge. A man who is aware of that Divine '*ilm* and of the mysteries of the invisible existence is a 'realizer' (*muḥaqqiq*). One who has studied the same subject through scholastic programs and discussions is called *muqallid* or imitator, because he imitates the words and expressions without awareness of their realities or inward meanings:

*Between the realizer and the imitator,
there are many differences.
The former is like David and the imitator
is only an echo [not a song, not a singer].*⁷

Some other of Rūmī's expressions of esoteric knowledge ('*ilm-i bāṭin*) might here also be mentioned:

Tahqīq or '*ilm-i tahqīqī* or knowledge gained through spiritual realization is another expression for knowledge of the real and Eternal Existence and, on the opposite side, there is '*ilm-i taqlīdī* or

5. M II/3797-3798.

6. M III/1306-8.

7. M II/496.

imitative knowledge which refers to what is taught in the schools:

*Conventional 'ilm is only for sale [or self-advertisement].
When it finds a purchaser, it glows with delight.
The purchaser of real knowledge is God
And for such a knowledge, the market is always flourishing.*⁸

For *'ilm-i taḥqīqī*, Rūmī has also used the terms “the knowledge of real religion” (*'ilm-i dīn*),⁹ or “the knowledge of one who becomes aware through his heart” (*'ilm-i ahl-i dil*).¹⁰ Rūmī believes that worldly knowledge is an obstacle on the road to the real and divine knowledge:

*The knowledge of followers of external sense is a muzzle,
So that those believers in sense perception
cannot drink the milk of that high knowledge*¹¹

This high knowledge, in some other verses of the *Mathnawī* is mentioned as: *naẓar*,¹² *baṣar*,¹³ *dīd*,¹⁴ *dīd-i-ṣun'-bīn*,¹⁵ *chishm-i rāst*,¹⁶ *chishm-i dil*,¹⁷ *chishm-i maḥramān*,¹⁸ *nūr-i dīl*,¹⁹ *'ayān*,²⁰ *'aynu'-l-'ayān*,²¹ and *'ilm-i ladunī* or *'ilm-i min ladun*.²² All of these are Rūmī's expressions for a spiritual vision which enables man to understand the eternal and invisible Being by medium of what Rūmī regards as the internal senses or *ḥawāss-i bāṭin*.²³ On the other hand, as I said before, Rūmī takes the antonyms of these terms to indicate worldly and scholastic knowledge, for example:

8. M II/3276.

9. M I/1019.

10. M I/3461.

11. M I/1020.

12. M IV/422 673 & v. VI/1467-70, 3001.

13. M I/1476 & III/1224, 1727, VI/1469, 2627.

14. M I/925-8, 1416 & v. III/4353.

15. M VI/1667.

16. M II/452.

17. M VI/4419.

18. M VI/4659.

19. M III/727; VI/2141.

20. v. 2/177, 1825-30 & M III 4124, & VI 4031.

21. M VI/4419.

22. M I/817, 994 & VI/1849.

23. M I/3590.

– ‘*Ilmhā-yi ahl-i hiss*,²⁴ “the knowledge of those who believe in their material senses.”

– *Hiss-i khuffāsh*,²⁵ “the bat’s sense,” meaning ‘the sense of one who is unable to see the Sun of reality.’

– *Zann, Gumān or Shakk*,²⁶ “supposition,” “mistrust” and “doubt” in the reality and existence of the invisible world.

In Rūmī’s view, man was not created to satisfy the material side of his being; rather material being is a vehicle by which he should approach the frontier of Eternity. Rūmī believes that besides our five material senses, there are five internal ones by which the eternal and invisible world may be understood. We have to reduce little by little our dependency on our material senses and try to get rid of our material desires. Then our internal senses will start to work and enable us to understand what cannot be taught through educational programs and by means of the sophisticated and expensive equipment of modern schools and universities:

*The ear of the head is as cotton-wool in the ear of conscience.
To open the inner ear, the ear of the head must become deaf.*²⁷

Such a transition from the material and sensual life into a spiritual understanding of the invisible existence, for most people, seems to be unbelievable or at least impossible, and indeed most people are not expected to elevate themselves to experience such a transformation. But in Rūmī’s view, this elevation is accessible to everyone who deserves the favor of God and His support. Divine favour will enable man to change his external senses into inner senses or *hawāss-i bāṭin*. For such a change, Rūmī’s expression is *guzāra shudan-i hawāss*, or “the passing of the senses through the veil of ignorance”:

24. M I/1018.

25. M II/45-47.

26. M I/3456, v. 3/4120 & VI/2797, 4118.

27. M I/571.

*When his senses have passed through the veil,
His vision and allocution from God will be continuous.*²⁸

Another expression for this change is *taqlīb-i rabb* or *taqlīb-i khudā*,²⁹ "a spiritual change made by God," by which Rūmī refers to a Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) according to which "the hearts of human beings are all between two fingers of God as a single heart, and He turns that single heart as He likes."³⁰

To explain the differences between a man who deserves favor and support from God and a man who does not have such a capacity, Rūmī has many different allegories and parables in the *Mathnawī*. One of them is the story of a domestic fowl who fostered a few ducklings, which she hatched under her wings. The ducklings came out of their shells and later walked toward the riverside with their foster mother. On the river they immediately began to swim, but the domestic fowl walked around and did not dare to go into the water. Following this parable, Rūmī says:

*Leave the nurse on the dry land;
You sail into the sea of spiritual reality like ducks.*³¹

Those who are able to swim in the sea of reality, are not slaves of their material desires or *hawā-yi nafs*. Their material needs and desires have been harnessed in the service of their immaterial life, and as Rūmī said, "They believe that man's original food is the Light of God."³² Such food may not be eaten through our material mouths and throats. Their spiritual elevation gives them another mouth and another throat by which they can get immaterial food and drink,³³ and that food is nothing but the spiritual awareness of Absolute Existence (*ḥastī-yi muṭlaq*).

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize again that my purpose in this brief survey of Rūmī's conception of knowledge is not to

28. M VI/1929.

29. See: M/IV 3729, v. 6221, 3710.

30. See Badi' al-Zamān Furūzānfar, *Aḥadith-i Mathnawī* (Tehran: Amir Kabir 1361 A.Hsh.), p. 6.

31. M II/3786.

32. M II/1086.

33. See: M I/3890.

denigrate or deny the valuable results of progress in science and technology. Rūmī himself did not denigrate the values of scholastic and religious studies in his time. The main consideration is that the whole of knowledge, culture and civilization must serve as a ladder to the achievement of a spiritual and humane elevation, and all schools, universities and research centers must cooperate in the attainment of such a degree.

Contemporary man cannot, and does not need to close down schools, universities and research centers. Neither can he live all the time in a *Khānaqāh* or a monastery. He does not need to deprive himself of worldly pleasures and activities, but he urgently needs to take some courses in divine love, and to search for a resurrection which hopefully may lead us towards moral and spiritual stability, *In shā'Allāh*.

THE HERITAGE OF SUFISM

VOLUME I

*Classical Persian Sufism
from its Origins to Rumi (700–1300)*

EDITED BY LEONARD LEWISOHN



O N E W O R L D

O X F O R D

THE HERITAGE OF SUFISM
VOLUME I

Oneworld Publications
(Sales and Editorial)
185 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7AR
England
<http://www.oneworld-publications.com>

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*Reproduction of the illustrations in this
volume has been made possible by a generous grant
from the British Institute of Persian Studies.*

ISBN 1-85168-188-4

Cover design by Design Deluxe