

Ethics of Seeking Knowledge in the Islamic Theology: Depiction of the Quranic Perspectives

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Abstract

Acquisition of knowledge is the basic need of human being. The psychologists, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists had described various principles, rules and laws for seeking knowledge in its best form. But, there is scarcity of ethical principles, values, and standards for seeking knowledge among the modern as well as classical psychologists, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists. The description of ethics for seeking knowledge had only been the characteristic of the Islamic theorists and educationists. They had ignited their thoughts from the teachings of the Holy Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The present study is a brief description of the ethics of knowledge seeking in the light of Quranic perspectives. It is observed that sincerity, tolerance and respect are the pillars of the knowledge acquisition process.

Key words: Seeking knowledge, Holy Quran, sincerity, tolerance, respect, sincerity

Introduction:

Pursuit of knowledge is the kernel of life which starts with the first breath in this world and continues till the death. It is the process of getting acquainted with oneself and with the surroundings. It is said to the process of knowing oneself to the knowing of God Almighty. Therefore, Allah (SWT) in its first message to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) introduced the human beings with the importance of Knowledge by saying “and HE taught the man what he did not know”.¹ It reflects that according to Muslims it is the gateway to the information and facts about the universe and himself.

As far as the concept of the knowledge is concerned morphologically the Arabic word ilm (علم) is derived from ain (ع), lam (ل) and mim (م) that means to know, or to gash. In general meaning the process of tearing earth by a leaflet is called “Ilm” in the Arabic language. Thus getting oriented to the new environment, circumstances and conditions is the meaning of the term “ilm” i.e. knowledge. Moreover, the dictionary meaning of the term knowledge also suggests to know or to understand an object, concept of certain aspect or a process of product. Similarly, knowledge is the effort to perceive the factual position of something² specifically it means the light by Allah, which he inculcates in the heart of somebody³.

On the other hand in the Islamic perspectives the seeking and transferring the knowledge is said to be the obligatory duty of the Muslims. That is why the process of seeking and providing knowledge is referred as great Ibadat. Hence the person involved in the process of knowledge sharing is liked and preferred by Allah. So Allah says: “Say, Are those who know and those who do not know equal? Only those possessed of reason will remember⁴.” There are number of Quranic verses and Ahadith in which the term knowledge or its associated words are used. For instance in the Holy Quran, the basic source of guidance, at number of places the importance of seeking knowledge is stated. For example, in the Holy Quran the word “alim” has occurred at 140 different places whereas the word “al-ilm” is repeated 27 times.

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Similarly, there are 704 verses in the Holy Quran in which the word “al-ilm” or its associated words are used. Moreover al-kitab is repeated in 230 verses.⁵

It is obvious from the above facts that Islam lays much stress on the acquisition of knowledge. But, at the same time Islam had specified certain ethical obligations for making fruitful the process of getting knowledge. Seeking knowledge in Islam is neither unguided nor directionless. There are certain bindings for both the teachers and students which they have to follow for acquiring knowledge. Moreover, there is also a concept of fruitful or purposive knowledge and lawful and unlawful types of knowledge has also been clarified in the teachings of Islam. Therefore, the researchers considered it important to summarize these specific aspects of knowledge seeking process.

Purpose of the Study:

In the present era of science and technology most of the contemporary teaching-learning approaches and strategies are said to be the brainchild of the Western psychologists, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists. The rest of the techniques are usually referred to the contributions of Socratic, Aristotelian, Plato or other ancient intellectuals’ wisdom. All of these academicians and scholars had focused upon the methods and techniques of acquiring and transferring knowledge. A few of them had also made efforts to recommend measures for memorization and preservation of the acquired knowledge. But, among all these ancient and modern philosophers and anthropologists non had mad any effort to describe the basic ethics for seeking knowledge, virtues of good or bad knowledge or the explanation of desirable and abhorrence types of knowledge. On the other hand the Islamic values and traditions possess abundant evidences about the ethical parameters and principles governing the whole process of seeking knowledge. Not only the Holy Quran and Hadith are filled with various ethical facts but number of Muslim scholars e.g. Allama Zarnogi,⁶ Ibn e Khuldun⁷ and Imam Ghazali,⁸ had explained the ethical principles and values for acquiring the knowledge. The present study is an effort to highlight some of the important ethical considerations for seeking knowledge. Hence the ethics of seeking knowledge in the Quranic perspectives have been discussed in this study.

Methods and Materials:

The study at hand is a document analysis in its nature as it deals with the study and interpretation of facts relating to the past.⁹ Different documents including, the Holy Quran, Books of Hadith, Explanations of the Holy Quran (Tafaseer), and other books of the eminent Muslim scholars have been used as primary source for the interpretations of facts regarding ethics of seeking knowledge.

Research Findings and Interpretations:

Review of literature and a deep investigation of the document has revealed that there are certain distinctive facts about the ethics of seeking knowledge which are not available in the writings of academicians and scholars other than the Muslims. They had focused upon the materials, methods, strategies and approaches to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge. At the same time there is lot of discussion about making the process of knowledge seeking interesting and attractive. But, the ethics to be observed by the students and teachers are not described. Different ethics for seeking knowledge as prescribed by the Quran and Hadith are here by presented.

Sincerity:

The intention behind the undertaking a deed is of much important. The Prophet said that the deeds are the dependent of intensions.¹⁰ The same is the case with the sincerity i.e. *ikhlas* in the process of seeking knowledge. The only intention in the pursuit of knowledge should be the consent and approval of Allah (SWA). This is also the etiquette proposed by the Quran is the seeking of Allah, s happiness. There is admiration of educated people in Quran and the thing whom Allah praises it becomes a Holy prayer. Moreover purity of the

mind is more basic and important condition for acceptance of prayer. Thus the sincerity and purity of mind is the pre-requisite for the acceptance of all deeds

“They were commanded only to worship Allah, devoting their faith to Him alone, and to practice regular prayer, and to give alms. That is the upright religion.”¹¹

While describing the sincerity Ibn Jamaa’ah said:

“It means that one has a good intention when seeking knowledge, by intending through his studies to please Allah, to act in accordance with what he learns, to revive the Sharee’ah (Islamic legislation), to illuminate his heart, to elucidate its (i.e. knowledge’s) hidden meanings; to get near to Allah on the Day of Judgement, and to subject oneself to what Allah has prepared for those who possess it, such as His Contentment and great virtue.”

Hence for getting Allah's happiness seeking knowledge is important but, there are certain limits in the persuasion of the knowledge. The man cannot indulge in vague and unfruitful type of knowledge. Moreover, the person should not get knowledge only for the worldly benefits. They should seek it for the eternal benefit. Moreover, knowledge should not be sought to fulfil some worldly aim such as assuming leadership, gaining wealth and high status, competing with coworkers, making the people to praise him, having the distinctive position in a get-together, and so on.¹² If a person gets mortal rank by it then for him there is a harsh penalty according to saying Allah's prophet

"People who get that knowledge which is specified for Allah's satisfaction, for gathering worldly wealth will not get even the fragrance of paradise¹³".

Similarly the Prophet (PBUH) said “Whoever learns knowledge to rival scholars, to debate with fools, or to draw people to him, is in the Fire.”¹⁴

The purpose behind the advocacy of sincerity in every act is to make the people learn that Allah Almighty is observing their deeds and knows their intentions. Hence, the sincerity of determination is the foundation of every pious act. Therefore, a true seeker of knowledge always keep following saying of Allah in mind during seeking knowledge.

"You must have to know that there is no one except Allah which is only one able to prayer before him”¹⁵.

In short, the sincerity or *ikhlas* in seeking knowledge is the perquisite for getting its benefits in this world and the world to come here after.

Respect:

The respect is another ritual of the knowledge seeking process. There are three important aspects of respect in the knowledge seeking phenomenon i.e.

- i. Respect of the knowledge seeker or the student
- ii. The person providing the knowledge or the teacher
- iii. The content to be taught or transferred

The respect of both the teachers and the scholars is very important in the Islamic perspective. It is important for the students to take care of the dignity and respect of their teachers. Similarly, the teachers had to be affectionate with the students and are asked to deal them with love and politeness. In Surah al Kahaf Hazrat Moosa A.S said to Hazrat Khizar A.S.

“Moses said to him, “May I follow you, so that you may teach me some of the guidance you were taught?”¹⁶

Hafiz Ibn-e-Kathir writes in Tafseer of these verses that Hazrat Moosa A.S talked Hazrat Khizar A.S with respect and obedience so that he can make Hazrat Khizar A.S to be kind in teaching. A seeker must be like them. They ask that if you permit I can live with you, and can get Knowledge which can give me profit and my deeds become pious.¹⁷ Moreover, Khataib Baghdadi states from Sha,aba that the person who listened the whole Hadith he becomes his servant for all of his life.¹⁸

As a seeker of knowledge the student should come the teacher with state of stillness of mind, heart and body i.e. *sakina*. It means that the learner should show full obedience to the teacher and listen attentively what the teacher says. It does not mean the student have to

ignore their personality or respect. They ought to exhibit high standards of the dignified seriousness i.e. *waqar*. The display of *sakina and waqar* by the disciple is the sign of respect for the Teacher and the content being taught.

In the same way the respect for the content and the books with the Islamic content had also been considered sacred and respectable by both the teachers and the students. It is performed because the Holy Quran states "Whoever honors the symbols of God, verily it is from the piety of the hearts."¹⁹ An important exhibition of the order of the God is made by Imām Mālik while writing the Hadith. He used to make *wuḍū'*, be dressed in his best clothes, comb the beard, put the fragrance upon his body and clothes, take a respectable posture and wrote the Hadith with newly sharpened pen after saying two *Nawafil*. This shows the sincerity of mind, respect and honor for the content i.e. the message of the Holy Prophet. There is abundance of similar examples of the respect of sacred monuments, content and relics of the dignitaries of the Muslim world.

Tolerance and Determination:

A true seeker of knowledge must be determined by keeping in mind the importance and value of knowledge. He must face all the problems with patience and bravery. He must not fall prey of boredom. Instead he must continue his work of seeking knowledge with zeal and zest. Mostly it happens that when a man feels to be bored by a work then he became tired physically. As a result he leaves that work and this becomes a great hurdle in the process of seeking knowledge. But if a true seeker of knowledge remains determined for the auspicious act, he becomes able to get the specific reward of tolerant people and worldly profit. As Allah says in Quran:

"These are some stories from the past that we reveal to you. Neither you, nor your people knew them before this. So be patient. The future belongs to the pious.,,"²⁰

This obedience of seeking knowledge has its importance that can be seen by Quran in case of Hazrat Moosa (A.S) and Hazrat Khizar (A.S). When Hazrat Moosa (A.S) wanted to get permission for seeking knowledge from Hazrat Khizar (A.S) then he said:

"He said, "You will not be able to endure with me. And how will you endure what you have no knowledge of"²¹.

To its answer Quran has copied these words of Hazrat Moosa (A.S):

"He said, "You will find me, Allah willing, patient; and I will not disobey you in any order of yours."²²

Above stated verses show us the importance of tolerance in getting knowledge. Moreover in this path tolerance is not so easy. That's why for next two moments Hazrat Khizar (A.S) said to Hazrat Moosa (A.S) that:

"He said, "Did I not tell you that you will not be able to endure with me?"²³

About this Hazrat Abdullah bin Abbas stated the saying of Hazrat Muhammad (S.A.W.A.S) that "May Allah bless us and Moosa (A.S) if he had waited for some more time and if they had tolerance then many amazing facts could have been known".²⁴

From this we can infer that a seeker of knowledge must have a firm determination to tolerate all the hurdles in path of seeking knowledge and should stay steady as saying of Hazrat Moosa A.S is in Quran.

"Recall when Moses said to his servant, "I will not give up until I reach the junction of the two rivers, even if it takes me years."²⁵

Hafiz Ibn e Kathir had stated saying of Abdullah Bin Umar about "Huqub" they said it is time of 80 years Mujahid says 70 Ibn-e-Abbas says it's a period.²⁶

Moreover Moosa A.S saying in Quran.

"When they went further, he said to his servant, "Bring us our lunch; we were exposed in our travel to much fatigue."²⁷

By these we can get that Hazrat Moosa A.S and there companion had discovered a long journey for seeking knowledge. They had to face many problems but they done it for seeking knowledge.

It has been observed that throughout the Muslim history people had been showing great tolerance in the process of acquisition of knowledge. They had made dangerous and difficult journeys, starved and faced restrictions. They remain out of their native places for years and face the faire and foul weather with smiling faces in seeking the knowledge.

Conclusion:

The study at hand is an effort to bring to light some of the distinctive features of the knowledge seeking process. The document analysis i.e. Quran and Hadith, has revealed that sincerity, respect and tolerance are the few important ethical principles of seeking knowledge. The sincerity of the learner deals with the intention of the learner of the purpose of seeking knowledge. It enables a person to pursue the desirable knowledge to earn the pleasure and forgiveness of Allah (SWA). Similarly, the virtue of respect for the teacher, student and the content matter is helpful in seeking the knowledge in peaceful and dignified manner. There exist a pleasant and comfortable learning environment, in which both the teachers and students have a relationship of mutual respect and love. Finally the tolerance in the process of seeking knowledge enables the learners to obtain the quality knowledge. It matures the students enough to bear difficulties during the knowledge seeking process. It would be helpful in understanding the difficulties and finding their solutions so that the future learners do not have to face the similar problems. The habit of tolerance shapes a person in such a way that he can live a successful life and enjoy the pleasure of Allah (SWA) forgiveness in the life to come here after.

Discussion:

This document analysis has focused the features of the process of the acquisition of knowledge which had been ignored by the previous and contemporary researchers. They had tried to make the process of getting knowledge comfortable and student centered. But, in the teachings of Islam seeking of Ilm, knowledge refers to know about the one-self and the universe which ultimately leads to recognize Almighty Allah as the creator of the whole universe. In the same way knowledge is described as the main source of acquaintance with the creatures of this universe so that man can get maximum benefit from those. The ethical aspect of respect enables both the teachers and students to take care on the benefits of each other. This is the ultimate outcome of the knowledge acquiring endeavor. The sincerity is the personal trait of an individual which helps him to become more close to Allah through performing acceptable deeds. It leads to the purity of mind and the purification of soul and spirit. Lastly the tolerance is the virtue which helps in continuing the process of knowledge acquiring even in the hard times following the examples of the Muslim ensisters. In the light of the teachings of Islam following aspects are important for creating tolerance among the learners.

- i. Be aware of the Obstacles
- ii. Avoid Hasad (Envy)
- iii. Do not be Arrogant
- iv. Do not be Hasty
- v. Do not be Lackadaisical or Lazy
- vi. Organize Your Time

In short, the Islamic theology does not focus upon the acquisition of knowledge just for addition in information but, for the guidance to the path way to succeed in both the worlds. Seeking knowledge is not only essential for the survival but also important for the grant of forgiveness after all it is the obligatory duty of each Muslim man and woman.

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