

SOME BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION- WITH REFERENCE TO THE MESSAGE OF JALĀL AL-DĪN RŪMĪ

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Yakū biā o yakū gā o yakū dāā

Badiā kbatm āmad aĀl o far' i imāā

(See but the One, say but the One, know but the One,

For in this is sealed the root and branches of faith.)

(Shabistari)

Islam is the religion of unity (*al-tawĀid*) which is both the principle and goal of all things essentially Islamic. This truth is most evident in the case of education that in its widest sense is the goal of the religion itself. Islam sees the human being as being comprised of many faculties and possessing levels of existences from the physical to the spiritual. Nevertheless, he possesses a unity and wholeness that all authentic manifestations of the principle of Islamic education have sought to address. In other words the subject of Islamic education must be the whole of man.

It must then be asked who is man in the Islamic perspective. At once God's servant (*'abd-Allah*) and vicegerent (*kehalīfat-Allāh*) on earth, man was created upon the *Āūrah* of God according to the famous *Āadīth*, "*Khalqa Allāhu 'l-jdama 'alā Āuratibi* (God created man upon His image) which means that man reflects all of God's Names and Qualities, God not possessing *Āūrah* or form in the technical sense of the term. By virtue of this reality man can reach the highest perfection of becoming the mirror in which God reflects Himself and "knows" Himself. That is the station of *al-insān al-kāmil* or Universal Man and it might be said that the ultimate goal of Islamic education, especially as envisages by Sufī masters such as *Rūmī*, is to enable man to become what he is in reality, that is, the Universal Man.

Man is also the sum of the levels of existence synthesised in a “small” cosmos which for that reason is called microcosm. As such, he contains all the levels of existence within himself including body, soul and intellect or spirit (*al-jism, al-nafs, and al-‘aql/al-rūĀ* or to use the Persian terminology of Rūmī (*tan, jān and kĥirad/jān-i jānān*). A complete educational program must therefore cater to the needs to all these realities within man as in fact one sees in traditional Islamic education when it possessed wholeness and was not bereft of any of its major aspects, this being particularly true of Sufi education when it included the formal as well as the purely spiritual aspects of the training and education of the disciple.

We need not concern ourselves here with physical education except to recall the fact that traditional living itself caused the body to exercise and that in addition there were such traditional sports as horseback riding, archery, wrestling, etc. Formal education dealt most of all with what today is called the “mind”, although this term is understood differently in an Islamic context and the mind was always considered in conjunction with its relation to the Spirit. And so Rūmī states:

Ay birādar tū hama andīsha ī

mā baqā tū ustukhān o rīsha ī

O brother thou art all thought,

The rest of thee is but sinew and bones*

One must remember that from the point of view of Islamic metaphysics man is essentially what he knows and we become existentially transformed by our knowledge and become identified ultimately with what we know principally. This knowledge is often identified with vision in Sufi literature and the Sufis speak of that organ with which we are able to know the Invisible World as the eye of the heart (*‘ayn al-qalb/chishm i dil*) rather than ear or some other organ. Vision symbolises knowledge and is in fact knowledge as we call a wise man a seer or visionary in English. Rūmī refers to this relationship and ultimate significance of knowledge when he says.

Tu nayī āū jism, tū āū dīda ī

wā rabī az jism, gar jān dīda ī

ādami dīd ast, bāqī gāsbht o pāst

har che chasmash dīda ast, āū chīz āst

(Thou art not this body, thou art that vision,

Thou shalt escape from the body, if thou seest the soul.

Man is vision, the rest is flesh and skin,

Whatever his eye sees, that is what he is.)

No clearer statement can be made of the identity of man's essence with principial knowledge. But such knowledge can only be attained if mental education is accompanied and complemented by spiritual education. Our mental activity and meditation (*fiker*) must be illuminated and elevated by the remembrance of God (*dhiker*)

Fiker kun tā wā rabī az fiker i kbud

Dhiker kun tā fiker gardī dar jasad

Dhiker gā tā fiker i tū bālā kunad

Dhiker guftan fiker rā wālā kunad

(Meditate until thou becomest free of thought of thyself,

Invoke (remember God) until thy body becomes meditation

Invoke until thy thought is elevated,

For invocation elevates one's thought/meditation.)

Any education implies, however, before anything preparation and readiness in the being of the person who is to undergo the process of education. There must be before anything else an acceptance of one's ignorance and the yearning to know. The person who is ignorant and is not aware of his ignorance is in the state of what is traditionally called

“compound ignorance” (*jahl-i murakkaḥ*) which is a mortal disease of the mind. One who is infected by it is not in a state that is conducive to being educated. Since Islam places the goal of education not on its worldly results, which are nevertheless legitimate on their own level, but on the soteriological character of knowledge, it places the greatest value in that yearning (*Ḥalab*) which qualifies a person for becoming educated. That is why a student in a traditional Islamic school (*madrasah*) is still called a *Ḥalīb* (pl. *Ḥullāb*). The Sufis extend this yearning to the realm of spiritual perfection and consider it as one of the most important qualities of a seeker after inner perfection. In a famous poem Rūmī goes so far as to say.

ĵb kam jū, tishnagī āwar ba dast

Ta bi jūshad ābat aẓ balā o past

(Seek less water, rather become thirsty,

For then water will gush forth from above and below.)

Precisely because the goal of Islamic education is ultimately perfection of the human soul and salvation (*falāḤ*), this type of education is never separated from ethical and moral considerations along with the formal and logical, totally in contrast to modern Western education. This truth can be seen in the curricula of traditional *madrasahs*, where students study after the Qurʾān and related subjects *ʿilm al-akhlāq* or ethics before embarking upon other subjects. As for Sufism, ethical training is at the heart of all Sufi education as demonstrated by the writings of such masters as Imām Abu ʿl-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and Imām Abū Ḥamid MuḤammad al-Ghazzālī. For the Sufis this ethical education means also spiritual discipline and the cleansing of one’s heart and mind in addition to correct external action. For once the heart is cleansed the eye of the heart opens and is then able to gain knowledge of that which is externally invisible. Or to use the Qurʾānic symbol of the expansion of the breast,

Har ke rā bāshad ẓi sīna fatḤ i bāb

ú ẓe har dharrah bi binad āftab

(Whoever has had the door of his breast opened,

He will be able to see the sun in every atom.)

Education cannot therefore be limited to the training of the rational faculty separated from the Intellect which is its principle and revelation which alone can make accessible the light of the Intellect for it in an operative way and also provide the ethical framework within which the training of reason must take place. Without accepting revelation and its injunctions one ends up with hedonism or a rampant rationalism whose dire consequences for humanity are evident today wherever modernism, which is inseparable from rationalism even if seems to negate it in certain of its manifestations as irrationalism, has spread. Islamic education cannot seek to educate the mind outside of the world of faith.

*Falsafī kū munkar i Āannānah** ast*

Az Āawās i anbiyā bīgāna ast

(The rationalist philosopher being in denial of prophecy

Is devoid of the inner sense of the prophets.)

The training of the mind or reason (*'aql-i juz'ī*) must always be in relation to revelation (*waĀy*) on the one hand and the Universal Intellect (*'aql-i kullī*), which is ultimately none other than the instrument of revelation, on the other. The Mathnawī is replete with references to *'aql* and the distinction between *'aql-i juz'ī* and *'aql-i kullī*. The latter is in fact the source of all the knowledge attainable by reason, and when Rūmī criticises *'aql* in favour of love *'ishq*, he has always in mind *'aql-i juz'ī* which according to him should be sacrificed before the Blessed Prophet.

'Aql rā kun tū fidā i muĀÇafā

(Sacrifice thy reason before Mustafa)

As for *'aql-i kullī*, it is the source of both knowledge of the cosmos and attachment to it, the goal of all veritable education of *'aql-i juz'ī*.

ÿä jabāā yak fikrat ast az 'aql-i kull

'Aql-i kull shāh ast o Āūrat hā subul

(This world is but a thought of the Universal Intellect,

The Universal Intellect is king and forms its messengers.)

This awareness of the subordinate role of reason *vis-a-vis* the Intellect and placing them in a hierarchy is part and parcel of the reality of the hierarchy of all the elements of the human being according to which each lower level must be educated to submit to the higher level in accordance with the natural order of things. The senses must be subordinated to reason and reason to intellect/Spirit.

Áiss asír i ‘Aql bāshad ay fulān

‘Aql asír i rūÁ bāshad ham badān

Sense is the prisoner of reason, o man!

And reason prisoner of the Spirit, know this truth.

It is the reality of this hierarchy that an authentic Islamic education must respect and has always respected. It is only the presence of *‘aql i juẓ’i* wed to *‘aql-i kullī* through the gift of faith (*īmān*) that can prevent our rebellious passions from bringing ruin upon us and creating an obstacle to the realisation of that perfection for whose attainment we were created.

‘Aql dar tan Áākim i imān buwad

Ke ẓa bīmasb nafs dar ẓindān buwad

‘aql is the ruler of faith in the body,

From whose fear the passionate ego remains imprisoned.

Ultimately all real education and instruction comes from the *‘aql-i kullī* and *waÁy* for in Islam revelation is based primarily upon knowledge and its transmission. Lest one forgets, the most famous names by which the Sacred Book of Islam is known, such as *al-Qur’ān*, *al-Furqān*, *Umm al-kitāb* and *al-Hidāyah* are all related to the category of knowledge. It is in the light of this truth that Rūmī goes so far as to say.

Ẓn nujūm o Çib waÁy i anbiyāst

‘Aql o Áiss rā sū i bīsū rāh kunjāst

‘Aql i juẓyi ‘aql i istikbrāj nīst

Juz padhira i fan o mu'Ataj nist

Qabili ta'lim o fahm ast in kbirad

Lük Ää'Äib wa'Äy ta'limash dahad

Jumlab Äirfat ha yaqin az wa'Äy büd

Anwal ü lük 'aql an rā barfazüd

Hich Äirfat rā bi bin kün 'aql i mā

Tā na dād amükbt bi hich üstā

This astronomy and medicine is (knowledge given by) Divine inspiration to the prophets: where is the way for intellect and sense (to advance) towards that which is without (spatial) direction.

The particular (individual) intellect is not the intellect (capable) of production: it is only the receiver of science and is in need (of teaching).

This intellect is capable of being taught and of apprehending, but (only) the man possessed of Divine inspiration gives it the teaching (which it requires). Assuredly, in their beginning, all trades (crafts and professions) were (derived) from Divine inspiration, but the intellect adds (something) to them.

Consider whether this intellect of ours can learn any trade without a master.

Although it (the intellect) was hair-splitting (subtle and ingenious) in contrivance, no trade was subdued (brought under command) without a master.

If knowledge of trade were (derived) from this intellect, any trade would be acquired without a master.

(Nicholson Translation, Book IV, v. 1294-1300)

Without reliance upon '*aql i kulli* and *wa'Äy*, reason usurps the position of centrality in the soul while being unable to attain to authentic knowledge and certitude. It is this version of '*aql* limited to its ratiocinative powers call

instidlāl to which Rūmī refers as the wooden leg which cannot attain firm knowledge.

Pā i istadlālīyān chūbīn buvad

The leg of the rationalists is a wooden one.

Islamic education must train this rational faculty but always in light of the tenets of faith and the inalienable link which exists between *'aql i juẓ'i* and *'aql i kullī*.

Furthermore, Islamic education must include not only a formal aspect represented in formal learning which a master such as Rūmī possessed to the highest degree, but also intuition, creativity, and the possibility of response to that divinely given intellectual power to which Rūmī subordinates formal learning. Such an intuitive power cannot be cultivated in all people, but in any case it should not be stifled through formal education by excessive outward regimentation and blind imitation (*taqlīd*) which as far as the experience of the truth is concerned, and certainly not imitation of models established by the Noble Qur'ān, Hadith and the great traditional figures, was strongly opposed by Rūmī.

'Aql dā 'aql ast anwal muksibī

Keb darāmūzī chu dar maktab Ābī

Az kitāb o ūstād o fikr o dhikr

Az ma'ānī waẓ 'ulūm i kbūb o biker

'Aql i tū afzūn shawad bar dīgarān

Lūk tū bāshī ẓa Āifī ān garān

Law Ā Āfīū bāshī andar danr o gasbt

Law Ā ma Āfīū ast kū zīn dar guẓasbt

'Aql i dīgar bakhshishi yazdān buvad

Chasmā i ān darmiyān i jān buwad

Chūn za sīna āb i dānish jūsh kard

Ne shawad ganda na dīrīna na zard

Intelligence consists of two intelligences; the former is the acquired one which you learn, like a boy at school, From book and teacher and reflection and (committing to) memory, and from concepts, and from excellent and virgin (hitherto unstudied) sciences.

(By this means) your intelligence becomes superior to (that of) others; but through preserving (retaining in your mind) that (knowledge) you are heavily burdened.

You, (occupied) in wandering and going about (in search of knowledge), are a preserving (recording) tablet; the preserved tablet is he that has passed beyond this.

The other intelligence is the gift of God: its fountain is in the midst of the soul.

Went the water of (God-given) knowledge gushes from the breast, it does not become fetid or old or yellow (impure); And if its way issue (to outside) be stopped, what harm? for it gushes continually from the house (of the heart). The acquired intelligence is like the conduits that run into a house from the streets:

(If) its (the house's) waterway is blocked, it is without any supply (of water). Seek the fountain from within yourself!

(Nicholson Translation, Book IV, v. 1960-1968)

Since Islamic education embraces the whole of man's being from the physical to the mental to the spiritual, it must include of necessity not only an ethical dimension but also an aesthetic one. The role and significance of aesthetic education is vast and its discussion would necessitate a separate treatment. Nevertheless, it is important to mention it here and also to add that of all the Muslim authorities, none has dealt with the philosophy of beauty and the importance of art and aesthetics with the same depth and thoroughness as Rūmī. Suffice it to say that this incomparable sage/poet

whose life was enudated with manifestations of beauty considered God Himself as man's teacher in the arts. As he states in this *rubā'ī*,

Man āshiqī aẓ kalām i tū āmūẓam

Bayt o ghaẓal aẓ jamāl i tū āmūẓam

Dar parda i dil kbayal i tū raqĀ kunad

Man raqĀ ham aẓ kbayāl i tū āmūẓam

I learn love from Thy Word,

I learn poems and ghazals from Thy Beauty.

The imagining of Thee dances through the veil of the heart,

I learn the sacred dance from imagining Thee.

The highest goal of an Islamic education must correspond of necessity to the highest aim and purpose of the human state and in fact of creation which is to know God according to the famous hadith, "I was a hidden treasure; I wanted to be known; therefore I created the world so that I would be known," a hadith known generally as the hadith of *kanẓ makhfī* or "hidden treasure". Now, this supreme knowledge is not possible without that attraction and love which Rūmī calls *'ishq*. In fact the verb "wanted" in the above hadith is the rendition of the Arabic verb *aĀbabtū* which means in reality "loved to". Love is therefore inseparable from this supreme knowledge, this love not being simple human emotion but a divine reality about which Rūmī said:

Shād bash ay 'ishq i kbush sawdā i mā

Ay Çabib i ijumlah 'illat hā i mā

Ay dawā i nakbwat o nāmūs i mā

Ay tū AflāÇūm o Jalinūs i mā

Hail O Love that bringest us good gain-thou that art the physician of all our ills.

The remedy of our pride and vain glory, our Plato and our Galen!

(Nicholson Translation, Book I, v.23-24)

No wonder that for Rūmī the person who does not possess this fire of love is unworthy to exist as a human being.

jīdash ast īn bāng i nay o nīst bād

Har keh īn ādash na dāradmīst bād

This sound of the reed is fire, not wind,

Whose does not possess this fire, may be he naught!

True education must turn the spark of that fire which lies somewhere under the cinder of our hardened heart and forgetful mind into a burning flame without which we live beneath the veritable human state.

Islamic education is thus based upon a gradation ranging from the physical to the mental and rational to the spiritual in accordance with the structure of the human state. It is also an educational system permeated on all these levels by the light of faith and combined with ethical and aesthetic components at every stage. The crowning achievement of this education is to make possible the knowledge of God through the illumination of our being by the Universal Intellect with the help of that fire of love or *‘ishq* which was kneaded into the very clay of our existence when God created us. This love must therefore permeate all aspects of education from the love of knowledge to the love between teacher and student that on the higher level becomes the love between spiritual master and disciple. As the Persian poet Nāīrī has said,

*Dars i faqīh ar buvad zamzama i ma-Āabbatū
Jum‘ah ba maktab āvarad Ğifl i gurayz-pā i rā*

Were the lessons of the teacher be a chant of love, It would bring the fleeting child to school on Friday.

Note and References

*All translations of Persian poetry unless otherwise stated are by us. The

poems of Rūmī are from his *Mathnawī*, except where stated.

***Āannānah* is the tree against which the Blessed Prophet of Islam leaned while preaching and announcing the verses of the Qur'ānic revelation. Hence Rūmī uses it poetically as the equivalent of prophecy itself.