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**The Concept of Ma'arifa in Sufism as a Pathway to Spiritual Realization in Islamic Mysticism**

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**Abstract**

The concept of Ma'arifa in Sufism represents a profound journey toward spiritual enlightenment and inner realization of the Divine. Rooted in Islamic mysticism, Ma'arifa goes beyond conventional knowledge, serving as an experiential form of divine understanding that touches the heart and soul of the seeker. This research delves into Ma'arifa as a critical aspect of the Sufi path, emphasizing its role in attaining a deeper awareness of Allah. Unlike intellectual knowledge, which is acquired through study, Ma'arifa is attained through purification of the self (nafs), remembrance of God (dhikr), and divine unveiling (kashf). The paper explores the sources of Ma'arifa, including the Qur'an, the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), spiritual guidance from Murshids, and the inner experiences of the seeker. It further highlights the significance of the heart (qalb) in Sufi thought as the ultimate receptacle for this profound knowledge. By examining the stages of spiritual progression, from outer practices (Shari'ah) to the inner journey (Tariqah) and ultimate truth (Haqiqah), this research underscores Ma'arifa as a transformative force that leads the believer closer to Allah, bringing about humility, compassion, and an intimate connection with the Divine. Ultimately, Ma'arifa serves as a pathway to spiritual realization, guiding the Sufi towards a life of peace, sincerity, and divine love.

**Keywords:** Ma'arifa, Sufism, Islamic Mysticism, Spiritual Realization, Divine Knowledge, Dhikr, Kashf, Tariqah, Haqiqah, Sufi Path, Heart (Qalb).

**Introduction:**

Sufism, or Tasawwuf in Arabic, is the mystical and spiritual dimension of Islam. It focuses on the inward search for God and striving for spiritual closeness to the Divine. While mainstream Islam emphasizes external practices and laws (Shariah), Sufism emphasizes internal purification (Tazkiyah), love of God (Mahabba), and the realization of divine truth (Haqiqah).

Sufism arose within the early Islamic community as a reaction to the perceived worldliness and materialism of the expanding Muslim empire.

Under the root صوف, the meaning of Sufism is:

"وسمّي المتصوّفة بذلك لأنهم كانوا يلبسون الصوف" <sup>(1)</sup>

"They were called Sufis because they used to wear wool."

This refers to the early ascetics who wore simple wool garments as a symbol of renunciation of worldly pleasures.

Another meaning of Sufism is:

"هو الانقطاع إلى الله، والزهد في ما سوى الله" <sup>(2)</sup>

"It is complete devotion to God and asceticism in anything other than God."

According to these dictionaries, Sufism is about:

- Turning your heart completely to God.
- Letting go of love for the material world.
- Living a life full of worship, reflection, and inner peace.
- Spending time in silence or solitude to get closer to God.

In short, the name likely comes from the Arabic word "šūf", which means wool. Early Sufis used to wear rough wool clothes, not to be stylish, but to show they were humble and not attached to luxury or material things. It was a symbol of living simply and focusing on God. Sufism is the spiritual, heart-focused side of Islam. It's not just about rules and rituals, it's about deep love for God, cleaning your soul, and living with humility and simplicity.

#### Core Beliefs and Practices of Sufism:

- **Tawhid (Oneness of God):** Sufis emphasize a deep, experiential understanding of God's unity, often expressed through poetic and symbolic language.
- **Love of God:** Sufi poetry and literature, such as the works of Rumi and Ibn Arabi, focus intensely on divine love and longing for union with God.
- **Dhikr (Remembrance of God):** A core Sufi practice involving repetition of God's names, verses from the Qur'an, or devotional phrases to purify the heart.
- **Muraqaba (Meditation):** A spiritual practice of contemplation to attain divine presence and insight.
- **Bay'ah (Spiritual Allegiance):** A disciple (murid) often pledges allegiance to a spiritual guide (shaykh or pir) to be guided along the Sufi path (tariqa).
- **Stages of the Sufi Path:** Sufism divides spiritual growth into stages or stations (maqamat) and states (ahwal), progressing toward annihilation of the self (fana) and subsistence in God (baqa).

Sufism has deeply influenced Islamic art, poetry, music, and architecture. It played a key role in the spread of Islam to South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia. Sufi saints were often at the forefront of missionary efforts, combining deep spirituality with compassionate service.

#### What is Ma'arifa?

Ma'arifa (معرفة) in Islam and Sufism means deep, spiritual knowledge or awareness of Allah. It is not just learning facts, but truly understanding and feeling Allah's presence in the heart. In Sufism, Ma'arifa comes through love, devotion, and inner connection with God, beyond just following rules. Sufis believe that when a person purifies their soul and sincerely seeks Allah, He blesses them with Ma'arifa. It is a higher level of faith where the heart sees what the eyes cannot. This special knowledge brings peace, closeness to God, and helps one live with love, humility, and kindness.

The Arabic word Ma'arifa (معرفة) comes from the root 'A-R-F (ع ر ف), which means "to know" or "to recognize." Literally, Ma'arifa means recognition, knowledge, or awareness, especially a deep, personal kind of knowing that comes from experience or inner realization.

Ma'arifa (معرفة) is defined as:

"العلم بالشيء بعد التَّفَكُّر فيه" <sup>(3)</sup>

"Knowledge of something after thinking and reflecting upon it."

It is often contrasted with 'ilm (علم). While 'ilm can refer to general or theoretical knowledge, Ma'arifa implies a specific, recognized, or internalized knowledge, often through personal experience or spiritual realization.

Al-Raghib al-Isfahani explains:

"المعرفة أخص من العلم، فالعلم يكون ابتداءً، والمعرفة تكون عن تجربة" <sup>(4)</sup>

"Ma'arifa is more specific than 'ilm. 'Ilm can come at the beginning, but Ma'arifa comes through experience."

This shows that in the Arabic linguistic tradition, Ma'arifa is a deeper form of knowledge, often tied to recognition and inward realization which aligns with its use in Islamic spirituality and Sufism.

Ma'arifa refers to recognizing Allah as the One true God through signs in creation, revelation, and reason. It is foundational in Tawheed (the oneness of God).

Ma'arifa is a spiritual realization or inner knowledge of Allah. It goes beyond intellectual understanding (known as 'ilm) to direct, heart-based experience of Divine truth. It is considered a high spiritual station (maqam) reached after deep purification, devotion, and love of God.

A famous Sufi scholar defines Ma'arifa as:

"A light that Allah casts into the heart of a servant, by which he sees the truth of things as they really are." <sup>(5)</sup>

That means, Ma'arifa is the deep, experiential knowledge of Allah, beyond books and words which is achieved through love, worship, and inner purification. In Sufism, it is the goal of the spiritual path, where the seeker becomes truly aware of the Divine Presence.

#### **Concept of Ma'arifa in Islamic Sufism:**

In Sufism, Ma'arifa means a deep, personal understanding and awareness of God that goes beyond regular learning or study. It's not just about knowing facts; it's about feeling and experiencing the truth of God in your heart. Sufis believe this kind of knowledge comes from spiritual practice, love, and the cleansing of the soul. It's a gift from God that brings a person closer to Him. Someone who has Ma'arifa sees the world with a heart full of light, humility, and compassion because they feel connected to the Divine in a very real and inner way.

The main goal of Sufi saints is to gain ma'rifat (spiritual knowledge or recognition of God). A person who gains this knowledge is called an arif, meaning someone who has recognized God just like they know themselves. Without ma'rifat, a person cannot truly love Allah, because love starts with understanding. That's why ma'rifat is considered higher than ordinary knowledge. According to Imam Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri, when a person gains ma'rifat, they become free from the control of their selfish desires and begin to obey Allah with full focus. This is why ma'rifat is seen as very important in Sufism, it's considered the main purpose of the Sufi path.

#### **Key Aspects of Ma'arifa:**

- **Inner Knowing:** Unlike formal religious knowledge ('ilm), which is learned from books or teachers, ma'arifa is gained through inner experience, purification of the self (nafs), and direct perception of divine truths.
- **Path to God:** Sufis believe that through spiritual discipline, love, remembrance (dhikr), and annihilation of the ego (fana), the seeker can attain ma'arifa, a state in which the heart becomes illuminated with divine presence.
- **Stages of the Path:** In the Sufi path (ṭarīqah), ma'arifa is often seen as one of the final stages, after sharī'a (exoteric practice) and ṭarīqa (the inner path). It comes before or alongside ḥaqīqa (ultimate truth).

- **Gift, not Right:** Sufis emphasize that ma'arifa is not something one earns through effort alone, it is a grace (fadl) from God, bestowed upon those whose hearts are ready to receive it.
- **Union and Intimacy:** A person with ma'arifa is sometimes called a 'ārif bi'llāh (knower of God), and is said to have an intimate, almost ineffable connection with the Divine. This can manifest in humility, compassion, and a sense of unity with all creation.

### Sources to attain Ma'arifa in Sufism:

In Sufism, ma'arifa is the deep, spiritual knowledge of God, which goes beyond just learning facts. It's about truly feeling God's presence in your heart and understanding Him on a much deeper level. This knowledge is often linked to divine love, which is the pure, unconditional love for God that leads the heart toward Him. When Sufis experience kashf, it's like God reveals hidden truths to them, giving them spiritual clarity that they didn't know before. These experiences are often guided by a spiritual teacher or murshid, who helps the seeker stay on the right path and understand these spiritual experiences. Sometimes, ilham happens, which is when inspiration or divine insight comes suddenly from God, guiding the seeker. For all of this to happen, the heart (qalb) must be pure, because the heart is where God's light is felt most deeply. The goal is to let divine love guide everything you do, bringing you closer to God's truth.

Here is the explanation of some main sources of ma'arifa.

#### 1. Divine Revelation (Wahy) as a Source of Ma'arifa:

In Sufism, the Qur'an is seen not just as a legal or theological text but as a multi-layered spiritual guide. Sufis believe the Qur'an contains hidden (batin) meanings that can only be accessed through deep inner transformation, divine illumination, and spiritual unveiling.

ذَٰلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ ۚ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ <sup>(6)</sup>

"This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of God."

For Sufis, this verse implies that the Qur'an is a guide not only to outer conduct but to inner realization. The muttaqeen (God-conscious) are those whose hearts are already open to higher truths.

#### 2. Prophetic Tradition (Hadith) as a Source of Ma'arifa

In Sufism, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is seen not only as the transmitter of the divine message but as the perfect embodiment of divine qualities. His inner state, spiritual path, and character are regarded as direct channels through which ma'arifa, spiritual knowledge of God, is transmitted.

Sufis strive to imitate the Prophet not only in his outward actions but also in his inward states. The Hadith literature (sayings and traditions of the Prophet) is thus a key source for those seeking gnosis.

Al-Hajweiri writes:

"The Sufis agree that the Prophet's inner states are the key to all mystical knowledge, and without love for him, there can be no unveiling." <sup>(7)</sup>

Sufis consider the Prophetic traditions essential to the path of ma'arifa. The Prophet is not only the outward lawgiver but the inner guide and spiritual model. Through following his Sunnah in spirit and form, seekers gain access to divine realities that lead to true gnosis.

#### 3. Spiritual Unveiling (Kashf)

Kashf in Sufism means unveiling or disclosure. It is when God lifts the veils from a person's heart, allowing them to see or feel spiritual truths directly. It's not about seeing with the eyes, but about seeing with the heart.

Sufis believe that after deep spiritual practice, like prayer, remembrance of God (dhikr), and purifying the ego, God may give someone kashf as a gift, not because they deserve it, but out of divine mercy.

لَقَدْ كُنْتَ فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنْكَ غِطَاءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ الْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ<sup>(8)</sup>

“You were certainly in unmindfulness of this, and we have removed from you your cover, so your sight, this day, is sharp.”

Sufis say this Light can fill the heart of a person, and when that happens, they begin to perceive divine realities; this is part of kashf.

A famous Sufi scholar explains that kashf is when a person sees the truth of things without needing logical proof. He says:

“Kashf is a light that appears in the heart, showing the real nature of things.”<sup>(9)</sup>

Kashf is like God opening your inner eyes. You don’t get it by reading books, it comes after spiritual work and God’s permission. It helps you feel God’s presence more clearly and know truths you couldn’t before. And it’s not magic or prophecy, it’s deep spiritual clarity.

#### 4. Spiritual Guide (Murshid or Shaykh)

In Sufism, the spiritual guide is extremely important. A Murshid (or Shaykh) is someone who helps you on your journey of inner spiritual growth. They are experts in guiding people to become closer to God.

The guide teaches you how to purify your heart, how to meditate, how to perform remembrance of God (dhikr), and how to stay humble and patient.

Ibn Ata'illah, who is a famous Sufi scholar, said:

“The Shaykh is the bridge that connects you to God. You cannot cross the ocean of spiritual understanding without a boat, and the Shaykh is your boat.”<sup>(10)</sup>

The spiritual guide is a teacher who helps you grow closer to God. They offer both knowledge and examples of how to live a life full of God’s love. The guide leads you step by step, making sure you don’t go off course. Sufis believe the guide is essential for those who seek true spiritual knowledge and connection with God.

#### 5. Inspiration (Ilham)

In Sufism, Ilham refers to divine inspiration or intuitive knowledge that comes directly from God. Unlike normal knowledge gained through study or experience, ilham is a sudden, inner insight that guides the heart and soul. It is a form of knowledge that isn’t learned through books or teachings but comes as a gift from God.

Ilham is when God places a new understanding or realization into a person’s heart. It can happen in moments of prayer, reflection, or even in ordinary life.

A famous Sufi scholar explains:

“Ilham is a type of divine intuition or insight where a person feels an inner truth revealed directly by God. It is not learned, but a gift from God.”<sup>(11)</sup>

Ilham can guide the heart to deeper understandings of God. It’s like an inner light that directs the seeker’s thoughts, often helping them make decisions or understand things they couldn’t before.

#### 6. Heart (Qalb) as a Source of Ma’arifa:

In Sufism, the heart (Qalb) is considered the most important part of a person’s being when it comes to spiritual knowledge (ma’arifa). It’s not just the physical organ that pumps blood, but the inner center of spiritual perception and understanding.

Sufis believe that the heart is where God’s presence can be most strongly felt and known. It is through the heart that a person experiences closeness to God, spiritual insights, and the deep truths of existence.

In Sufi teachings, the heart is not only the seat of emotions but also the spiritual center where God's wisdom and love are revealed.

The heart must be purified from bad traits like anger, greed, and jealousy so that it can fully experience God's light and guidance.

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونْ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَا<sup>(12)</sup>

“Have they not traveled through the land, and have they hearts with which to understand?”

This verse shows that the heart is the place where true understanding comes from. Without a pure heart, one cannot truly know God.

The heart (Qalb) is the most important part of a person for receiving spiritual knowledge and closeness to God. Purifying the heart from negative emotions and desires allows a person to experience divine love and spiritual truths. Sufis believe that the heart is where true knowledge of God can be felt and understood deeply.

In Sufism, ma'arifa is the deep, spiritual knowledge of God, which goes beyond just learning facts. It's about truly feeling God's presence in your heart and understanding Him on a much deeper level. This knowledge is often linked to divine love, which is the pure, unconditional love for God that leads the heart toward Him. When Sufis experience kashf, it's like God reveals hidden truths to them, giving them spiritual clarity that they didn't know before. These experiences are often guided by a spiritual teacher or murshid, who helps the seeker stay on the right path and understand these spiritual experiences. Sometimes, ilham happens, which is when inspiration or divine insight comes suddenly from God, guiding the seeker. For all of this to happen, the heart (qalb) must be pure, because the heart is where God's light is felt most deeply. The goal is to let divine love guide everything you do, bringing you closer to God's truth.

#### Conclusion:

In conclusion, Ma'arifa in Sufism is a deep and special form of knowledge that goes beyond ordinary learning. It is the inner, spiritual understanding of Allah that is gained not just through study, but through sincere devotion, love, and closeness to Him. While knowledge ('ilm) may come from books and teachers, Ma'arifa is a light that shines in the heart of the believer when they truly purify themselves and seek Allah with honesty and humility.

The journey to Ma'arifa is a key goal for Sufis, and it involves not only learning but also spiritual experiences and deep inner reflection. As we discussed, the main sources of Ma'arifa include the Qur'an, the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), spiritual unveiling (kashf), divine inspiration (ilham), and the heart, which plays a central role in recognizing divine truths.

Ma'arifa leads a person to true awareness of Allah, helping them live a life of love, patience, humility, and trust in God's will. It brings a deep sense of peace and connection to the Creator that goes beyond the limits of words. This unique spiritual knowledge is what makes Sufism such a rich and meaningful path in Islamic tradition. It reminds us that the heart must be awakened, and not just the mind, in order to truly know and experience the Divine.

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