

Chapter 2. Knowledge of Self

Spiritual knowledge provides illumination

The sublime significance of higher learning (*vidya*) can be grasped by one or communicated to another only when the pure mind sheds its revealing light. Inside a room kept scrupulously clean, no snake, no scorpion, no poison-bearing insect can enter. They will be at home only in dark, dirty places. For the same reason, the sacred wisdom cannot enter dark and dirty hearts. Instead, poisonous breeds like anger will find those hearts to be congenial resorts.

Washing a lump of coal with soap and water won't rid the coal of its colour. Nor will washing it in milk help. The only way is to put it in a fire. That will turn it into a heap of white ash. Similarly, only gaining awareness of the *Atma* (*Atmajnana*)—in other words, knowledge of Brahman (*Brahma-vidya*)—will destroy the darkness of ignorance and the dirt of desire.

Darkness can be ended only with the help of light. Darkness cannot be overwhelmed by attacking it with more darkness. Spiritual knowledge (*vidya*) is the light that one needs to destroy the inner darkness. Spiritual learning provides the inner illumination. Spiritual wisdom is the authentic *yoga* of the Supreme Person (*Purushothama Yoga*) defined in the *Gita*; it is the knowledge of the Supreme, the higher learning (*vidya*). This *yoga* cannot be bought for money or acquired from friends or ordered from concerns or companies. It has to be assimilated and won by each one for oneself, through steady faith and ardent devotion.

The expression “God is nowhere” can remain unchanged; there is no need to confront or contradict it. The only thing necessary is to read the “w” in “where” in conjunction with the previous “no”, so that the expression becomes “God is now here”! The negative suddenly becomes positive. Similarly, merely by unifying the multidirectional vision that is now directed on the universe into one direction, the distinctions and the differences disappear and the many becomes One.

Holy people versus today's scholars

Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Jayadeva, Gauranga, Tukaram, Tulsidas, Ramdas, Kabirdas, Saradadevi, Meera, Sakkubai, Mallamma—they hadn't mastered the objective commentaries and elucidations of the many sciences and scriptural texts. Yet, to this day they are adored by followers of all faiths, adherents of all creeds, and natives of all lands. The reason obviously lies in their unshaken faith in the *Atma*, won through purification of the mind. Spiritual knowledge alone conferred on them the purity and the clarity. These holy people spoke what they had in their hearts, exactly as they felt or experienced it.

Consider, however, the present-day claimants of spiritual learning (*vidya*). Isn't it a fact that not even one in a million among them speaks exactly what is in their heart? They perform ritual worship to *Sathyanarayana*—*Narayana* or God in the form of truth (*sathya*)—one day a year; the rest of the year, every day, they worship *Narayana* in the form of untruth (*asathya-narayana*). The urge for objective scholarship is derived from this type of worship. Can this knowledge deserve to be called the higher learning (*vidya*)? No, never.

Heeding advice and correcting behaviour

Food on the plate, when not consumed by us or given to a hungry person, but kept unused, becomes foul. So too, when our faults and failings are not corrected, either by our own efforts or by heeding the advice of sympathetic souls who have succeeded in the cleansing process, imagine what the fate of our lives will be. Like the plate of boiled lentils (*dhal*) kept for too long, life will stink.

A father once praised his son's accomplishments and said in conclusion, "He has only two little faults. They are: (1) He doesn't know what his faults are, and (2) He will not listen if others point them out to him." This happened in the past. But today, not one son but each and every one is in the same predicament. It has become quite natural for every father to complain thus. Is this the value of the spiritual learning (*vidya*) they claim to have?

Children are by nature very good; the fault lies in the system that confers education (*vidya*) on them. Of course, this fact is known to all, but everyone shrinks from the task of reforming it. This is the major weakness. It is easy to advise in a million ways, but not even one thing is practised. "The system has to be transformed from the primary school right up to the universities" —this is declared and announced in newspapers— but no one can be seen who transforms it or even points out specifically what changes are to be effected and how. No one highlights the defects of the system.

People don't recognise the truth that spiritual, moral, and behavioural values are the very crown of human achievement. When not in office, people write articles and essays on education or indulge in parrot-talks from platforms. When the same people achieve positions of authority, they legislate measures quite contrary to what they proclaimed earlier. Of course, speeches from platforms are good, but their practice is paralysed. Unless this illness of speech without practice is cured, education and real scholarship cannot manifest its worth.

The magnet can draw iron toward itself, but it can't attract pieces of iron covered with dust and rust. The dust and rust on the pieces of iron have to be washed away, so that the magnet can attract. Similarly, when the mind is polished clean, the effect will be, as the poet says, "A great soul (*mahatma*) whose sign is one thought, one word, one deed." The harmony of these three is the best proof of the worth of humanity. This unique worth is now being disclaimed by people through their own volition, through unawareness of the genuine spiritual knowledge (*Atma-vidya*) that ought to be learned.

Sugar water versus plain water

Many scholars, pundits and experts flourished as contemporaries of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. But awareness of the *Atma* failed to illuminate them to any extent. As a result, the names of the scholars, pundits, and experts are not heard today. Only the name of Ramakrishna, who could not claim scholarship in any material or objective field of knowledge, has spread all over the world. Why? Sugar water and plain water look the same. Drink! Then you distinguish the one as sherbet and the other as just water. Paramahansa's words, which are full of supreme wisdom, are the sherbet; the words of scholars, which are soaked in textual scholarship, are the plain water. Pre-tentious pundits who have only perused the pages go after monetary gains; they don't rush toward the Divine.

Match sticks that have fallen into water cannot yield fire when struck, however vigorously you try. Besides, they spoil even the box that holds them. So, too, hearts soaked in worldly desires and designs may pour out parrot-exhortations but they can have at best only listeners, not practitioners. The listeners might receive advice, but they would not accept it or act accordingly.

Real and apparent knowledge

Every event in the world has a special cause that brought it about, namely, knowledge. Of course, without things to be known, there can be no knowledge. Knowledge itself is of two kinds: inner and outer, direct and indirect (*pratyaksha* and *paroksha*), real and apparent. Outer knowledge (*paroksha*) is gained through the ear and other sense organs and through the words of others. Inner knowledge (*a-paroksha*), the true knowledge, knows no plurality; it analyses and understands the attractions and objects that haunt the mind. It purifies the mind and widens the vision of the heart.