

Chapter 12. Instruments of Learning

The term *vidya* is derived by adding *ya* to the root *vidh*. *Ya* means ‘what’; *vidh*, ‘light’. So, “that which gives light” is *vidya*. This is the basic meaning of the word. Therefore, it is evident that only knowledge of Brahman (*Brahma-vidya*) deserves to be known as real knowledge. The ancients considered knowledge as light and ignorance (*a-vidya*) as darkness. Just as light and darkness cannot coexist at the same time in the same place, knowledge and ignorance cannot be together. So, all who journey along the path of progress have to purify their consciousness and illumine themselves through knowledge of Brahman.

The two aspects of education

In the section on manifestation of power (*Vibhuthi Yoga*), the *Gita* says that God declares, “Among all knowledge systems, I am the knowledge of the highest *Atma*!” All other knowledge systems are rivers; knowledge of the highest *Atma* is the ocean.

Just as all rivers find fulfilment merging in the ocean, all knowledge systems join the ocean of knowledge of the supreme *Atma* as their ultimate goal. This is not all. When rivers meet and mix with the ocean, they lose their separate names and forms and assume the name and form of the ocean itself. So too, the varied systems of knowledge concerned with the objective external world renounce their individual names and forms when they arrive at the confluence with the vast ocean of knowledge of Brahman.

Education can be considered as having two aspects: worldly education and knowledge of Brahman. Worldly education provides the wherewithal for human livelihood. One can study many subjects, earn valuable degrees, acquire higher and higher jobs, and manage to spend life without worry or fear. This type of education helps, whatever the job. On the other hand, knowledge of Brahman endows all human beings with the strength that enables them to discharge successfully the duty they owe to themselves. It lays down the path that leads both to joy in worldly relations and bliss in the life beyond.

Therefore, knowledge of Brahman is far superior to all other systems of knowledge available on earth. Knowledge of Brahman has the divine potency to liberate everyone from bondage. Worldly education has no such potency. Knowledge of Brahman makes you aware of the Omniself, the Absolute, the highest Brahman (*Parabrahman*).

Spiritual austerity and spiritual education

By means of spiritual learning and austerities (practices), one is transformed into a purified soul.

Vidya thapobhyaam puthatma.

Spiritual austerity (*tapas*) enables you to merge with That. Spiritual education is the process of acquiring knowledge; spiritual austerity is the known. The first is indirect, it is the means; the second is the goal, the end.

Soap and water are needed to wash accumulated dirt off one’s clothes. So too, both spiritual knowledge and spiritual penance are essential when one is anxious to remove the dirt that has stuck to the mind. Only when both

are used can the levels of consciousness be thoroughly cleansed. No vehicle can move without two wheels, nor can a bird fly on one wing. So too, no one can be rendered holy or purified without spiritual learning and spiritual austerity.

Spiritual austerity (*tapas*) does not mean positioning oneself upside down, head on the ground and feet held up, like a bat. Nor is it the renunciation of possessions and properties, wife and children, or emaciating one's body, or holding the nose to regulate breath. No. Physical actions, oral assertions, and mental resolves—all three have to be in unison. The thought, speech, and act all have to be pure. This is real spiritual austerity. Moreover, the three have to be coordinated not by the compulsion of duty but instead for the contentment of the self. The effort must be undertaken to satisfy one's inner yearnings. This struggle is the essence of spiritual penance (*tapas*).

The guru and the pupil

Guru means literally the “big” person, the “great” person. That is to say, the *guru* must have mastered both spiritual knowledge (*vidya*) and spiritual austerity (*tapas*).

The *Gita* depicts the ideal *guru* and the ideal student (*sisya*)—the pupil is the person of authority and the preceptor is the manifestation of the *Avatar*. Arjuna had earned the right to learn; Krishna had come as a man to teach man. The pupil is the best of people; the preceptor is the best among physical embodiments (*purushothama*). The pupil wields the bow; the *guru* wields the secret of all skills, *yoga*. Krishna is the Lord of *yoga* (*yogeswara*); Arjuna is the archer. When these two meet, education (*vidya*) is transformed into knowledge of Brahman (*Brahma-vidya*).

The pupil, Arjuna, after imbibing the teachings of Krishna, said, “I will do as you command (*Karishye vachanam thava*).” He threw away not his bow, the *Gandiva*, but his great big ego itself, the egotism (*ahamkara*) that was deluding him.

The *guru* was the director of the play. The pupil (*sisya*), Arjuna, was the character in the play. The pupil should not be proud to have been entrusted with a duty. As long as you are conceited, you cannot get a *guru*. When the *guru* accepts you, your pride will disappear.

Pupils should not feel great, be proud, or boast of the sense of renunciation when giving their all. The real renunciation is to give oneself away. Then, the *guru* will grant freedom to follow one's own will, as Krishna did. “Beloved Arjuna! As you will, so you act (*Yathechchasi, thathaa kuru*). Think well. And do as you like,” Krishna told him. He meant that He had given him all the advice he needed and had also accepted the ego Arjuna had discarded. So, Arjuna could now be granted freedom to act as he willed, for his will has become His.

The individual who has reached this level has to be given freedom. The *guru* should not mercilessly order the pupil about simply because the pupil dedicated everything to him. The greedy *guru* and the indolent disciple—both fall into perdition. The *guru* should not turn into a person who steals wealth (*vittha-apahaari*) but should be a person who steals hearts! The *guru* has to be an alarm timepiece. The *guru* must wake up those who are enveloped in the sleep of ignorance and reward them with teachings on the knowledge of their *Atmic* Reality.

The bad guru and the bad pupil

A traveler going through the countryside from village to village was confronted by a river in spate. The waters were rising and rushing. He was helpless because he did not know how to cross to the other bank. He looked

all around. He saw two men squatting under a tree, a little distance from where he stood, and walked toward them. He found that one of them was lame and the other was blind. So, he inferred that they would not know where the river was deep and where it was shallow enough to wade across. He went back, without questioning them. He knew their answers should not be acted upon.

The blind man in the story represents the preceptor who has not mastered the scriptures (*sastras*), which are the repositories of the experience gained by seekers in the past. The lame person represents the person who has not put the knowledge into practice and gained personal experience. In fact, knowledge of the scriptures and experience gained by its practical application—these two make a full person. Only such a *guru* can save the student by instruction and example. This is the conclusion expounded in the *Mundaka Upanishad*.

Even more difficult than getting a good pupil (*sishya*) is securing a good *guru*. Only when a real *guru* accepts them can disciples become exemplary persons. Pure-hearted students, unselfish students, non-egotistic students—when such aspirants approach them, *gurus* exult in ecstatic delight.

Parikshith, the emperor, renounced everything and decided to realise God; right at that moment, Maharshi Suka appeared to guide him straight to his goal. Similarly, when good disciples get good *gurus*, they succeed not only in attaining bliss but also in conferring peace, prosperity, and joy upon the entire world.