Sweetness and Light—Perspective on Wisdom and Knowledge

(Lecture at the annual Convention, Adyar, 1988)

MOST people think knowledge means to acquire facts and deposit them in memory for use when required. This is not the case. What really counts is not facts by themselves but the recognition of connections and correlations among the facts. That reduces to remembering only an organized index, not a whole host of facts.

When I was young, history was my bugbear. There were so many dates, so many kings and so many wars, and one never knew what the kings did. It was always safe to credit every king with all kinds of good things but the wars were more problematic because one never could relate the dates of the wars with the people. Nor could one figure out who fought whom. Only later did I realize there was underneath the maze a pattern. Once that was grasped, the rest was easy enough.

So one may say that the acquisition of knowledge is the perception of harmony with regard to the past and the present, and hopefully some cognition of the future. Harmony rests on causality, that is, an event taking place now is the effect of a preceding cause. In a sense the fabric of history is not something that is projected all of a sudden, but rather one that is woven together as a spider's web with many interconnections. A slight change in any one affects the whole. This perception of causality, orderliness, lawfulness and harmony may then be the essence of knowledge. What knowledge does is to enable us to see. We perceive not isolated events but a chain, a process, a flow. We recognize that the world is not odd jumbled facts and events. It is an organic whole continuously evolving. Facts do not exist in and of themselves but in connection with each other and all. Together they stand. Divided they reduce to indistinguishable rubble.

But knowledge also works more actively. With accumulation of facts and figures it is easy to forget. Therefore it becomes necessary to sift and discriminate from amongst what have been gathered. This is the work of knowledge. In a certain sense, knowledge also acts as a special vision, a vision beyond the immediate, the mere appearance. But all these pertain to knowledge from the outside.

There is a knowledge of the inside, from the inside that develops not by fact-gathering but by contemplation and

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meditation. We begin to see that what we had thought of as a rather simple mechanism by only observing the outside contains in itself an inner universe. The more we perceive, the more is yet to be perceived. The system inside is as replete as the system outside. Events outside are connected with other events by the causal chain. The happenings inside us are also likewise governed. This way of perceiving the world inside, of seeing the inside as outside, is sometimes called the sākshi-bhāva. It is seen as if in front of our eyes. And it marks a stage of growth in one's knowledge and in spiritual progress. If one can consider oneself as a system, as a mechanism, as a link governed by laws, in a certain sense one is beginning to shed one's separateness from the rest of the world, and moving to a coherent realization that one is the world.

Not that there is no world outside, but that the distinction between the outside and the inside begins to wear off and one finds continuity and harmony. Therefore it is important that if we want to have harmony in our life, we must have harmony between the inner and the outer. If the outer bothers us, then we should try to alter not merely the outer but the inner as well.

We build walls around us and take care to dump our garbage outside. While it certainly solves the immediate problem of disposal, it is not conducive to environmental cleanliness, or even to our own satisfaction in the long run, because when everybody follows suit, the entire neighbourhood stinks, and after some time we recognize whether we have the deed for a particular piece of land or not, whether a certain piece of property belongs to us or not, its being kept clean is incumbent on us, and we go about cleaning up everything around. In a sense the search for harmony takes us on to observe regularities, within and without, and also increase the harmony between them. As Sankara remarks in the opening stanza of the Dakshināmurti-stava: The world without is only a reflection of that within. The two are seen as one at the moment of illumination. The knowledge which enables us to see that there is no separation between the two must be adored, and salutation to that!

This identification of the discerning intelligence with the observed outer world is insight. One penetrates through the appearance into the core. This Insight is sometimes referred to as the gift of divine vision. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Arjuna almost like an experimental physicist says: 'I believe in all the things that you say, but I would really like to see them for myself. Could you show me at least a part of what you have said?' Lord Krishna replies, 'Yes, but unfortunately you cannot in your present state. I have to give you divine vision.' And when Arjuna, so endowed, begins to see he notes the continuity between the outside and the inside, between himself and Lord Krishna.

In literature, particularly in the traditional, there are passages where the meaning is reasonably straightforward. There are others which are deceptively simple, where the vākyārtha (the literal meaning) is really irrelevant; the real stuff is beneath and can be seen only by those who are equipped to look deeper. It is not necessarily because the words are clever but because of the constellation of ideas behind.

In scientific research also as we begin to
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go deeper, we start appreciating not only the ingenuity but the constellation of ideas. It is not the most complex scientific theory that is the most exciting or inspiring, but the simplest, the one that tells us about everyday things. Why is the sky blue? Why is the sea not always blue, but sometimes grey or green? Why sometimes we see a rainbow and sometimes not? Why ice floats on water? After all a cold body is supposed to contract. Therefore ice should be heavier than water. It is not a very good explanation to say this is so arranged so that the fish can live, but then we marvel that were it not so, the fish would have found it pretty difficult to live in cold climates.

When we first do things we need direction. A master to whom we are apprenticed tells us what is to be done. Later we are on our own. Then we look at what others are doing, what they say ought to be done, and we do likewise. This is also directed research though none is teaching in person. But then comes the moment of insight. We start realizing that what most of us do is devoid of meaning. We then start doing as what we think it should be or what we think to be the most natural. And the miracle is, right at that point knowledge bursts forth spontaneously.

We do not really go after it. We simply mind our business. We cut away all non-essentials and knowledge appears by itself. Then others remark that we are being very original. The interesting part of this entire experience is that we go through cycles of ego-enhancement and ego-deflation, until knowledge begins to assert itself spontaneously when we just cease to be there. When we do our best work we are not aware of who does it. As lightning comes before thunder and both usually before the rain, we have a sort of a premonition of something stupendous to happen and at that time we do not feel proud, or elated; rather we feel weak. At the moment when the inside world of the performing intelligence, the outside world of facts and connections, and the discriminating intelligence all orchestrate, the ego disappears leaving only a suffused happiness.

One then perceives the wisdom of the old devotional couplet:

To that goddess present in all beings in the form of intelligence (buddhi), salutations, and salutation.

The particular intelligence functioning in this fashion is not mine, nor related to anyone; it is really functioning in all; if I make a discovery and somebody else also makes it, neither really has any claim to it because the discerning intelligence is one and the same; it belongs to all.

Knowledge becomes wisdom when it begins to transform the person, and the best transformations are experiences, of the out-of-the-body, out-of-the-mind, out-of-the-ego sort in which we are a faint apparition of a beholder of what is happening. We see wonderful things taking place, we know we have no personal hold on any, and nevertheless we feel happy. At the end of it all, the only residue is joy. Whence did this happiness, this ananda issue? Not because we have done something, for we are unaware of having done anything; but because something has happened. May be a discovery, but that is not all. What has been found is, in fact, one can be functioning perfectly without being aware
of one's separateness from the rest of the world, that one can function grandly, do technical calculations, do intricate experiments, remember complex facts and relationships, and yet not be aware of the 'I'. It is very much like our speaking a language we know well; we do not say, 'Now let us see what the subject is, what its number and gender, and how we correspond it to the predicate.' It just comes out. We do not store it inside and then dispense it in doses. It is something which appears at the moment we want.

The connections between the external and the internal, between the phenomenal and the ideas, and finally between the lay and the spiritual are not necessarily complicated. When I was a tiro of grammar we were given a mnemonic about the vibhaktis or the declensions of the Sanskrit noun of which there are seven. However, the most important is the one without the prayāya or the declension. That mnemonic embeds a shaft of unwitting wisdom. A man may have many declensions, play many roles, be the subject or object, be this or that, but in all these cases he stands vis-à-vis something else. He is not fully himself. He is so only when he is without prayāya, when he stands alone, and not in relation to so-and-so.

'One who cannot be thought of, whose form is indistinct, who has no gunas, who is however the essence of all gunas, who is the support of all the worlds, to that Spirit my salutation.'

So far, I have only talked about the light aspect of knowledge or wisdom. Light is a fascinating subject not only scientifically but almost all literature goes ecstatic about light, enlightenment, perception, seeing, insight, vision, and so on. We have got to believe in the sākṣibhāva, the witness-stand because it is everyone's downright personal experience. However, what we see is perception, and what does it do for us? In fact, both tradition and our own experience show that there is bliss, there is a joy when knowledge becomes wisdom and begins not only to change the external world but also transform us within. It enables us to shed all accretions which we hitherto supposed to be ourselves.

What happens when we are ourselves? Firstly, we are not aware of what we are. The insight ends when there is nobody to see. What remains is sweetness, joy, a joy completely unconnected with things. It is like an experience of music. We are completely absorbed, the absorption remains, nothing else. In reciting certain inspiring verses we feel transported. We are not aware if we are reciting or listening. We lose all sense-anchorages. Like a balloon we float free.

As we grow in wisdom, we end up by seeing that there is only the undifferentiated, observing self, and that the consequence of this is bliss and bliss alone. In sacred writings, ananda or bliss has been praised again and again, as something incomparable, unconditioned by space or time, eternally free and independent of anything else and so on. Life becomes very sweet. The sweetness is so great that there is no desire to store or grasp or get back.'