

KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE (*)

By Swami Paratparananda

* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – November 1962; Vol. 49; page 282

Prevalent notion and how far it is true

The prevalent notion about knowledge is that, of possession of book-learning, information about the scientific and technological advance, and the intellect to utilize the information thus gathered for the improvement, maintenance and furtherance of one's material condition. And, all our education today is directed towards this one object, of gaining material knowledge and its utilization. Lack of such knowledge is considered in common parlance as ignorance. This is the standard by which civilization and progress of a country is judged at the present juncture. The greater the number of scientists a country can produce, the vaster its power to build huge industries, the more advanced and progressive it is considered to be.

While we do not say it is bad, we only urge that we should move onward and not stagnate. The stream of life must flow on. There should be a flow in the ideas, the thought-current should be able to irrigate vaster fields. It should give us incentive to be active, to be progressive in contributing to world-peace. The moment we put a barrier to our thinking, raise a wall, as it were, and cut ourselves off from the spirit, degradation sets in. We become onesided. Our development contracts lop-sidedness. For, man is not merely a lump of matter but spirit as well. Without the spirit, matter is powerless because matter as such, being inert, cannot act independently of the spirit. It has no purpose of its own to serve. A conscious entity alone can strive for something. The Samkhyas, the first and foremost evolutionists, stressed that *prakrti* (matter) exists and works for the sake of the *purusa* (the spirit) alone. The insentient *prakrti* works in the presence of the *purusa*, being, by itself, incapable of performing any action. There should therefore be a harmonious growth of the body, coupled with the uncovering of the spirit. So this knowledge of the sciences, which helps to drive away the crude notions of the geography of the world and the like, which enables us to extend the horizons of the various sciences to enormous magnitudes, and which develops our intelligence, should be utilized for the better understanding of the spirit as well. If we do not cultivate the spirit of introspection, how different are we from animals? Man is man because he can think of higher things.

This knowledge which would bring only material prosperity even the birds and beasts possess. In the Devi Mahatmyam there is a story very

illustrative of this: Suratha, a king deprived of his kingdom and living in a forest, still broods over the fate of his pet elephant and the erstwhile treasures which had fallen into the unscrupulous hands of the enemies. He understands that it is unprofitable to think of them, yet he could not shake off his attachment. He approaches a hermit named Medhas and places his doubt before him: 'Why, O wise one, we, who are possessed of knowledge, are repeatedly attracted to our past associations though they have been bitter, and are thus deluded?' The reply of the Muni is significant. 'Every being has this knowledge of objects perceivable by the senses. Man is certainly endowed with it, but it is not his exclusive possession, for that kind of knowledge even the cattle, birds and other creatures are seen to enjoy.'¹ Overtly it means we are no better than animals if we confine our knowledge to these things alone.

The lower creatures may not be knowing about the nuclear fusion or nuclear fallout, may not know about space or inter-planetary travel, but that does not in any way stand in their living of life. Man by his rapid strides in the scientific field creates problems which he himself finds too formidable to surmount, whereas other creatures adjust by change of surroundings or change in their internal organism. They instinctively develop, while man with his superior intelligence only gropes in the dark and gets frightened. So material knowledge alone cannot be made the be-all and end-all of life.

Similarly, ignorance of these sciences does not necessarily mean the ignorance of the animal type. Maybe, one may not be able to express one's ideas in attractive language or understand everything that goes on in this wise world of ours, but on that account one may not be classed in the category of fools. Perhaps he is better aware of the eternal values than most of the so-called learned or wise. 'M' the recorder of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna has, by faithfully placing before us his own discomfiture in an analogous situation, compelled our attention to understand what is knowledge and what is ignorance. Let us recollect the background: It was M's second visit to the Master. After some enquiries, 'Sri Ramakrishna looked at him kindly and said affectionately: "You see, you have certain good signs. I know them by looking at a person's forehead, his eyes and so on. Tell me now what kind of a person is your wife? Has she spiritual attributes, or is she under the power of avidya?"

M: "She is all right. But I am afraid she is ignorant."

Master (*with evident displeasure*): "And you are a man of knowledge?"

It was a rude shock for a man learned in the Western way to have been bluntly challenged in this manner. His own reflections on being thus addressed are worthy of our deep thought. He acknowledges: 'M had yet to learn the distinction between knowledge and ignorance. Up to this time his conception had been that one got knowledge from books and schools. Later on he gave up this false conception.'

Two types of knowledge

Knowledge can be sub-divided into two types. One knowledge which is cognizable by the senses and the other the intuitive, which is not of this world and which cannot be grasped by the senses. The *Mundaka Upanisad* makes this essential division: 'Two kinds of knowledge are to be acquired — the higher and the lower. The lower knowledge includes the four Vedas, Rig, Yajus, Sama and Atharva, and the Vedangas, like the science of pronunciation, the code of rituals, grammar, etymology, metre, and astrology. Then there is the higher (knowledge) by which the Immutable is realized.'² This is a bold statement by the Sruti. It says that even knowledge of the Vedas, which is considered to be the breath of the Lord, is given a lower position compared with that other knowledge by which one attains union with the Lord, what then to speak of knowledge of other sciences! The knowledge acquired through the senses can at best give us only worldly enjoyment.

At this point an objection may be raised: 'How can the knowledge (of Brahman) which is outside the Vedas be higher and how can it lead to emancipation, since it is traditionally accepted that the Smrtis, that are outside the pale of the Vedas and others perverted in their views, are useless as pathways to liberation? If such a view i.e., that the higher knowledge is outside the Vedas, is accepted then the Upanisads will have to be considered as outside the Vedas, which argument is definitely illogical.' Sankara refuting this objection says, 'It is not so, since by knowledge (*vidya*) is implied the realization of the thing to be known. What is chiefly meant to be conveyed by 'higher knowledge' is the knowledge of the Immutable which is what the Upanisads actually mean. It is not the mere collection of words that constitute the Upanisad. The books are called Upanisads in a secondary sense because of the knowledge therein contained. Without renunciation, and such other prerequisites, by the mere knowledge of the words of the Vedas, the 'higher knowledge' cannot be attained.'³

Further, in the Vivekachudamani, he explicitly and definitely says: 'Grand-eloquence, fluency in speech, dexterity in expounding the Sastras, contribute like the wisdom of the scholars, to enjoyment of the senses but never lead to emancipation.'⁴ Sri Ramakrishna, even as a boy, with his keen intellect evaluated the worth of this lower knowledge. He noticed with what end in view the pundits carried on their debates for hours together. He marked that it was all for the paltry and petty things of the world, and designated such education as 'bread-winning'. In disgust he discarded it and turned away from it for ever. In the later years he taught all those who came in contact with him, what he had learnt and practised all through his life: that to know God is knowledge and it is the only knowledge worth striving for. 'God alone is real, everything else is unreal. This alone is knowledge, all other knowledge is worthless ', said he. About mere scholarship he used to say: 'Kites rise high in the sky but their gaze

is fixed only on the charnel-pit below, likewise mere scholars may soar high in their intellectual attainments but their heart is always attracted towards sense-enjoyments.' What an enormous difference there is between acquisition of intellectual knowledge, and gaining of immediate experience of the Highest Reality. The former can be compared to a man learning to swim by reading books on swimming without getting into water. Sri Ramakrishna used to maintain: 'You cannot get a drop of water by squeezing the pages of the almanac which foretells hundreds of inches of rainfall.' This immediate experience, Vedanta calls as *aparoksanubhuti* or *Brahma-saksatkara*.

Nature of 'Higher Knowledge'

It has already been described that 'higher knowledge' leads to God-vision, the attainment of the Immutable, the Ultimate Reality. It is aptly described as of the nature of light, since it is the only thing that is able to disclose the Atman hidden in the innermost recesses of our heart. It alone dispels the darkness of ignorance which has accumulated in our minds for ages. Through it, one comes to know the relation between the *jiva* and Paramatma. By its agency one is able to commune with Him. Nay, it confers Brahmanhood itself on man. 'Verily, whosoever knows of the Supreme Brahman becomes Brahman,'⁵ says Mundaka Upanisad. When that state of knowledge is attained the differences between the knower, knowledge and the known is annihilated and the resplendent One alone shines in its true glory. 'There, neither the sun, the moon, the stars nor even the lightning shines, what then to speak of this mortal fire! All these shine through Its shining. By Its brilliance all this is perceived,'⁶ declares the Sruti.

By knowing the One — God, Brahman or by whatever name we may call It — everything else that is to be known becomes known, because in reality there exists nothing else except Brahman. The variety and the panorama we see are only names and forms of this One substance, like the various ornaments of gold differently called do not have a separate existence from that of gold. Brahman is the only reality. The world seems real because of the substratum of Brahman. Again, it is of the nature of bliss. Attaining it all other gains taste insipid.

Strange misgivings may arise at this juncture. One may ask, 'If obtaining this 'higher knowledge', one loses one's individuality what is the use of such knowledge? We require knowledge to alleviate our misery and elevate our hopes of living a comfortable life. If, therefore, by this knowledge we lose our individuality itself, how can we enjoy?' True, we cannot, but we forget that all our miseries, trials and tribulations are due to this clinging to individuality. If we want to transcend misery we have to forego this separateness, lose it in the ocean of *Satchidananda*. There is no other way. Sankara describes the condition of a person who tries to attain God while still holding to his bodily needs, as that of one who

attempts to cross a river with the help of a crocodile mistaking it for a log of wood.

Whether you are a bhakta or a jnani it matters little, unless we sink our boat of ego we won't be able to dive into the ocean of Highest Bliss. Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the cow whose miseries did not end even after its death till its entrails began to sing the note, 'Tuhu, Tuhu, Thou, 'Thou, O Lord not I,' on the carder's bow, is very apposite to the case of a devotee. Devotion means, continuous thought of the Lord, even a little forgetfulness of whom brings pain. Where then is the scope for the play of the ego in such a heart?

A jnani meditates: 'I am neither the body, nor the senses, neither the mind nor the intelligence, I am the Eternal Bliss and Awareness, I am Brahman.' His small ego is destroyed and has merged in Brahman like the water inside a jar dipped in a reservoir mingles with the vast sheet of water, when the jar too is broken, or like the *akasa* contained in a pot becomes one with the *Mahakasa* when the pot is destroyed. The elements merge into their origin. It is like one's home-coming. And why should we be afraid of going back to our own home? It is like the child's return to its mother. Is it afraid of returning to the mother's arms? On one occasion Sri Ramakrishna asked Narendranath (Swami Vivekananda): 'Well, my child, suppose there is a cup of nectar and you are like a fly. How would you like to taste it?' Narendranath replied: 'I would sit on the edge of the cup and drink it. If I venture further I would drown and die?' 'No, my boy, you will not die. It is the ocean of nectar, of immortality. One becomes immortal by diving into it. Dive and drink deep of it.'

Swami Vivekananda realized this, experienced such a state, and then dispelled fear from those who entertained identical doubts by such homely similes as: 'There was once a rain drop which fell into the ocean and it began to weep. The ocean asked the rain drop what ailed it. It said I am losing my identity. The ocean laughed and said, "No, my dear, you are becoming one with your brothers and sisters here. But if, however, you find your life miserable rise above through the sun's rays and travel as you wish, but then you will have to face the rugged mountains and such other hardships."' So also if at all we want eternal peace we have to lose our identity, our ego. It is only those who want to hold on to both the world and God that are afraid of losing their individuality and not a true lover of God.

What is Ignorance?

In an age of rationality man wants to know, why and what for of everything before he makes a move. We cannot brush aside this tendency of the age. The purpose of know-ledge is therefore to be stated. In a few words it can be said that the purpose is to dispel ignorance that has been enveloping us. What is this ignorance? We have briefly stated, in the beginning, what it is not. Now let us see what it is. Ignorance is described

as *maya* or *avidya*, in Indian Philosophy. It is the not-knowing of the essence of our nature, which is Satchidananda, that is called ignorance. Man thinks himself to be the body, the senses, or at the most an intellectual being, but never for once remembers his true nature. This is ignorance. Due to this identification he is impelled by the desires of the body, senses, and mind to work for their fulfilment. Like a bullock yoked to an oil mill — stretching its neck to get at the wisp of straw that dangles before it, but never reaches it — man works the mill of this world with a view to attain those little ever eluding tinsels of this world, those little comforts.

Man is familiar with the words, 'I' and 'mine'. How often do we not use this word in a day? But are we conscious of what we really mean at that time? We say: this wealth, this property, these people are mine. I shall enjoy this wealth. I shall amass more wealth. I am fair. I am dark. I am learned. I am ignorant. I am happy. I am miserable. All the time our identification is with the body, senses or mind. This, Sri Ramakrishna says, is ignorance.

Again he said 'lust and lucre' constitute ignorance, and the whole world knows how true it is! To accept the world and worldly things as they appear, to be real and to run after them is ignorance.

Whence this ignorance and what is its nature?

If our real nature is knowledge whence comes this ignorance? For, if knowledge is of the nature of light, it should not be clouded. Not so, for do we not find even the powerful sun being covered by a small cloud. How paltry is the cloud and how enormous is the sun. Yet does not the cloud, locally at least, prevent the sun being seen, from shining? Ignorance also similarly holds knowledge in abeyance by covering it, as it were. Ignorance sprouts from, our sages say, our desires and attachment. And these desires are due to our past actions (karma) and they in their turn are the effect of our actions in previous incarnations and so on. But whence did the first desire arise? To ask this question is to ask which was first the seed or the tree, the egg or the bird. Indian philosophers hold that these desires had no beginning, as also this ignorance. Its nature is that of darkness, of covering and projecting. In darkness we cannot see all things and many things that we see are not seen as they are. For instance, one sees a rope and mistakes it for a snake. The stump of a tree in darkness appears to one person as a ghost, to a thief as the policeman and to a lover as the beloved. Again it is like the mirage in the desert, creating wonderful pictures of lakes and landscape but with no actual reality behind it. Ignorance is so powerful that most of us in spite of our pride of knowledge, scientific and scriptural, are in it. Very few, perhaps one in a million, may escape its clutches. And those it is that show us that

ignorance can be ended, that it can be overcome by knowledge. Bring in a light and the darkness even though of thousands of years' duration, immediately vanishes.

Realizing our own nature as knowledge, ignorance in the form of conjured up images of this world falls off. And how does such a man live in this world? Let us quote Swami Vivekananda: 'Once in Western India I was travelling in the desert country. For days and days I used to travel on foot through the desert, but it was to my surprise that I saw every day beautiful lakes, with trees all round them, and the shadows of the trees upside down and vibrating there. "How wonderful it looks and they call this a desert country!" I said to myself. Nearly a month I travelled, seeing these wonderful lakes and trees and plants. One day I was very thirsty and wanted to have a drink of water, so I started to go to one of these clear, beautiful lakes, and as I approached, it vanished. And with a flash it came to my mind, "This is the mirage about which I have read all my life," and with that came also the idea that throughout the whole of this month, everyday, I had been seeing the mirage and did not know it. The next morning I began my march. There was again the lake, but with it came also the idea that it was the mirage and not a true lake. So is it with this universe. We are all travelling in this mirage of the world day after day, month after month, year after year, not knowing that it is a mirage. One day it will break up, but it will come back again; the body has to remain under the power of past Karma, and so the mirage will come back. This world will come back upon us so long as we are bound by Karma: men, women, animals, plants, our attachments and duties, all will come back to us, but not with the same power. Under the influence of the new knowledge the strength of Karma will be broken, its poison will be lost. It becomes transformed, for along with it there comes the idea that we know it now, that the sharp distinction between the reality and the mirage has been known'⁷ Such then is the nature of ignorance and such is its end.

¹ Devi Mahatmya 1.47 & 49.

² Mundaka 1.1.4-5.

³ Sankara Bhashya on the above sloka.

⁴ Vivekachudamani 60.

⁵ Mundaka Up. 3.2.8.

⁶ Ibid. 2.2.11. Also, Svetasvatara 6.14. Katha 5.15.

⁷ Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. II, pages 281-2.