

How to acquire superior knowledge?

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The Internet boom has taken the society to a different level altogether. The way we deal with one another, locate each other, connect with one another and converse, buy and sell items have all gone through a sea change. With a smart phone and Internet connectivity it appears that we can access anyone, anything, anywhere and at any time. One fall out of this is plentiful availability of information. If we search in the google with any keyword, we end up with 1000's of links pertaining to our search. This phenomenon is called information overload.

Currently, most of the learning happens through a process involving a teacher and the taught (usually students) in a face-to-face setting. This is accomplished in a brick and mortar arrangement (such as college or a common premise) where the two meet. In an era of Internet, we have new models of learning. The most recent one is known as Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The courses are available in a website and virtually anybody can enroll for the course and learn at his/her own pace. The teacher need not be present in the class nor need all students be present at the same time. It can be an individual choice for each student. Consequent to these developments, it is now understood by many that traditional methods of acquiring knowledge are no longer required as we have powerful tools, technical gadgets and websites at our disposal.

Information, Knowledge and Wisdom

There are three words that we need to understand in some detail before we can make any judgment about the current day claim on knowledge and learning. Information is a collection and a processed representation of data so that it has some meaning and use. Knowledge is the know-how of the information. In other words, it is a deeper understanding of the information through some practical experience of various applications of the information. The chemical properties of sugar, its physical form (crystalline, white colour), its properties (solubility in water for example) are disparate piece of data available in various domains. Putting them all together and relating them to a substance that we use in our daily life called sugar makes it information. Various applications of sugar (for food preparation, making a variety of sweet dishes, its impact on diabetic patients etc.) are examples of knowledge.

The highest form of knowledge gathering is acquiring wisdom (or superior knowledge). Wisdom comes out of prolonged use of the knowledge and the understanding gained out of personal experimentation and deep reflection. A person who has thoroughly studied everything about sugar will still be found lacking on two counts. First, as long as he puts a spoonful of sugar into his mouth, he may not even know what sweetness means. Further, mere knowledge of sugar and its side effects will not enable him in anyways to handle a child adamant on having too much sweet dish. Nor this person will know the inappropriate

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occasions in life when you do not make a grand sweet dish. This knowledge comes out of one's own wisdom gathered through experience.

The question therefore in front of us is how to acquire wisdom in our lives? The wisdom that we need in life is not just about these operational aspects of life. It also includes larger issues such as meaning and purpose of life. Will the websites and technology gadgets make us any wiser? Can MOOCs build wisdom into us? Lord Krishna has some ideas on how a person can acquire wisdom? We shall see one *śloka* from chapter 4 of the *Gītā* to understand this.

Four conditions for acquiring superior knowledge

Wisdom is a personal experience or an *anubhava* that one has. It is only through intense personal contact, dedication and seriousness in learning that one can attain wisdom. Therefore, according to Lord Krishna, in order to acquire wisdom, one needs to ensure that four things are available. The first is people with great wisdom (*jñāninaḥ*) who have “seen through” things in their life and know the crux of the matter (*tatvadarśinaḥ*). On the part of the seeker, three attributes are mentioned by Lord Krishna. True seekers of superior knowledge must totally submit them (*praṇipātena*) to the seer of the knowledge. Second, they must be at the total service of the seer (*sevayā*). Lastly, the seeker of superior knowledge must develop a high degree of constant internal inquiry into the knowledge being acquired (*paripraśnena*).

तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया ।

उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः ॥ 4.34

*tadviddhi praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā
upadekṣyanti te jñānam jñāninas-tatvadarśinaḥ*

A casual understanding of this *śloka* will make one feel that acquiring superior knowledge is all about a certain glorified version of slavery. Only a detailed and careful effort to decipher the intended meaning of the *śloka* will provide us with clarity and reveal to us the true secret behind acquiring superior knowledge.

The flow of superior knowledge

This *śloka* fundamentally describes how exactly superior knowledge will get transmitted from those who obtained to those who are seeking it. First of all such a knowledge transfer happens only when the knower and seeker engages in a one-to-one intensive teaching-learning process. The nearest reference to this in modern parlance is “under study”. Therefore the most critical question to ask is, when will the knowledge giver and seeker attain this “intense” phase? According to this *śloka* it will happen only when the student is able to capture the mind space of the guru and demonstrate his/her deep desire to learn.

By *praṇipāta* it is generally understood as falling at the feet of the guru (as a mark of respect). If people have too much ego, they find it offending and demeaning to fall at

somebody's feet. Also with too much ego it is impossible to truly learn anything in life as the ego will challenge the process and intervene too often. If the ego works at its best, it may begin to judge the capacity of the guru. Eventually, it may even discover the joy of proving that the disciple indeed knows certain aspects much better than the guru. This will truly play the spoilsport in any learning process leave alone knowledge acquiring.

The true meaning of *praṇipāta* in the context of this *śloka* is the ability of the disciple to surrender his/her ego to the guru and show by words and deeds that he/she is at any cost interested in obtaining the superior knowledge. This will invariably get the guru seriously interested to teach the disciple. This pattern occurs even in simple things in life, albeit in a lesser magnitude. If I go to an expert and say I would like to know something from him, he will be courteous to agree to help. But it does not progress until I approach that person a few times and begin to mentally engage with him. Once we reach this stage, there is an understanding of the seriousness of the whole exercise.

The other aspect is *sevā*. By *sevā* to the guru, the disciple unambiguously shows the reverence he has for him and the importance of obtaining the knowledge from the guru. This process is a sure method to capture the mindshare of the guru. By this process, the guru – disciple relationship becomes very strong and committed that the guru will be ready to get to any level to impart the wisdom to the disciple. The third aspect of improving the learning process is *paripraśna*. It is not about throwing questions at the teacher (which is a common approach these days). It is a process of repeated inquiry within, that arises on account of reflection on the idea, contemplation and a genuine effort to assimilate the knowledge gained from the teacher.

Wisdom and the Knowledge Era

The message that Lord Krishna has given us clearly positions the role of technology and the Internet. We live today in a knowledge era, are excited about creating a knowledge society, global information highways etc. All these are useful, in collecting more and more information, organize them into useful information and even acquire knowledge. However, they cannot bless one with wisdom. This *śloka* unlocks the secret of acquiring superior knowledge (wisdom in life) through a teacher – disciple interactive process. It will be almost impossible for technology to replace a guru in matters of wisdom.