

Axioms of Superior Knowledge¹

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Unlike other creations of God, human beings are thinking animals. Every one of us will inevitably acquire knowledge as we engage in many activities in life. This is perhaps the reason that notwithstanding our economic status and educational background getting to know something new has always been implicitly an interesting thing for us. If you are in doubt leave a computer in the hands of a group of village boys and see them after a week. They will find ways and means of using it. There are several other examples to demonstrate this inherent nature peculiar to human beings. For example, there is a rich tradition of tribal health practices, in which several remedial methods have been discovered. The way a one year old infant acquires worldly knowledge is another example.

How do we acquire knowledge?

If you ask this question many will point to things such as literacy, formal education, qualifications and certifications that one possesses etc. Some others will also include other things such as gaining through experience, keen observation, learning by doing etc. All these are means of acquiring knowledge that we seem to be aware of. Let us examine another question, how do we know someone has the right knowledge? Again going by our current understanding of the subject we may attribute it to a few things. By seeing the results of the work done by that person we may come to the conclusion that he/she has the right knowledge. Sometime we go by the endorsements provided by others with respect to one's knowledge. We also accept one to be knowledgeable when he/she gets respect and due recognition and acknowledgement from others who are considered as knowledgeable.

There is a third related question that we may have; how did one person acquire good knowledge? We may not be able to precisely answer this question. Some may attribute it to the person's inherent nature to be bright (in common parlance we may say he/she has a good brain). Some others may attribute it to the training he/she has received or the opportunity he/she was endowed with. Some others may even attribute all this to luck, providence or other such factors.

How one can master the art of acquiring good knowledge is a very important question today. This is simply because many of us think this to be a precursor to earning well and making a good living. While this may appeal if we look at our life as merely one of materialistic living, the question still has a greater relevance if we are willing to broad base this understanding. By acquiring the right and superior knowledge, we can lead a life that is

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self-enriching and meaningful. Therefore, we can rephrase the question and ask are there fundamental principles behind acquiring superior knowledge? Let us look at some ideas in Chapter 4 of *Bhagavad Gītā*, which can perhaps offer fresh perspectives into this issue.

Axioms of knowledge

Several *ślokas* in the closing section of chapter 4 has focused on this issue. Shri Krishna has provided multiple perspectives on various aspects pertaining to *jñāna*. The knowledge that is being referred to in these *ślokas* pertain to the ultimate knowledge of one-self. These collectively form the axioms of superior knowledge. However, these ideas are equally applicable even in our day-today-living. Four axioms stand out in their appeal to us.

Axiom 1: One attains knowledge only when there is faith

Shri Krishna says that the most fundamental requirement for someone to acquire superior knowledge is deep faith in the scheme of things (*śraddhā*). The greatest advantage of developing *śraddhā* is that it puts all needless distractions of the mind at rest as there is no scope for doubting about anything and lamenting on several events that happen in life. If we are found wanting in this attribute, we find several reasons for why things do not happen the way it ought. We conclude that the other person is lucky and the world is not a level playing ground. All these are villains in our journey of acquiring right knowledge. Therefore Shri Krishna says that such a person with *śraddhā* will have controlled senses (*tatparaḥ samyatendriyaḥ*) with which he/she can focus on the job of acquiring this knowledge.

श्रद्धावाँल्लभते ज्ञानं तत्परः संयतेन्द्रियः ।

shraddhāvāṁllabhate jñānam tatparaḥ samyatendriyaḥ (4.39)

There is a lot of sense in this perspective. A scientist or a Nobel laureate's greatest asset is not necessarily the knowledge that he already has but the deep faith that there is something new or unknown he/she will stumble up on. It is this faith which inspires such a person to put tireless efforts for several years which culminate in his/her making a new discovery. The same may be true of an artist or a poet.

Axiom 2: All work eventually leads us to the state of attaining knowledge

Shri Krishna further reiterates that all work will lead us to attaining knowledge. This takes the wind out of current discussions that we seem to have about work. Almost the entire conversation about work is all about pay, perks, promotions, power etc. What Shri Krishna proposes is that all good work (*sarvam karmākīlam*) should mean that we ultimately acquire superior knowledge (*jñāne parisamāpyate*). This happens only when we have a sense of dedication and devotion to work and see it as a means of self-evolution. Taking such a perspective will make us laser focused, deeply involved and alive to various aspects

pertaining to the work we do. This will automatically provide us with an opportunity to tread the path of knowledge.

सर्व कर्माखिलं पार्थ ज्ञाने परिसमाप्यते ॥

sarvam karmākīlam pārtha jñāne parisamāpyate (4.33)

Axiom 3: Right knowledge burns out all effects arising out of work

The previous axiom will logically lead us to this axiom. If the entire approach to work is one of acquiring superior knowledge, then it is obvious that the fire of knowledge (*jñānāgniḥ*) will burn away all the after effects work (*sarvakarmāṇi bhasmasātkurute*) to ashes. We will be so much inspired with this proposition of acquiring superior knowledge that pluses and minuses of work will fade into the background leaving no trace of impact on us. Shri Krishna gives an example of a burning fire consuming firewood (*yathaidhāmsi samiddho'gniḥ*) into ashes (*bhasmasātkurute*).

यथैधांसि समिद्धोऽग्निः भस्मसात्कुरुतेऽर्जुन ।

ज्ञानाग्निः सर्वकर्माणि भस्मसात्कुरुते तथा ॥ 4.37

*yathaidhāmsi samiddho'gniḥ bhasmasātkurute 'rjuna
jñānāgniḥ sarvakarmāṇi bhasmasātkurute tathā*

Philosophically speaking what it indicates is that as we acquire the ultimate knowledge, the *prārabdha* karmas are all burnt away leading us to salvation. In our day-to-day living it means that all the after effects of work, the stress arising out of work, the pushes and pulls of working life will all melt away as our perspective towards work will be one of acquiring superior knowledge. This is perhaps the right knowledge we must acquire in life.

Axiom 4: There is nothing purer like right knowledge

The final axiom about knowledge is nothing but a grand conclusion that we need to arrive at if we follow the previous axioms diligently in our life. What can be purer than a frame of mind that keeps one serene, gives one a sense of fulfillment and meaning to life? There is absolutely no guarantee that earning more will give one a sense of fulfillment. Our experience suggests that in our journey of earning more and making a good living we have inherited more complex ways of living and stress induced work place. This is why Shri Krishna concludes that nothing can be purer (*na hi pavitramiha vidyate*) like right knowledge (*jñānena sadṛśam*).

न हि ज्ञानेन सदृशं पवित्रमिह विद्यते ।

na hi jñānena sadṛśam pavitramiha vidyate (4.38)

Towards a Knowledge Society

Today, the idea of creating a knowledge society is one of gaining some knowledge about certain ways of doing things. It is all about skills, practices and know-how on some unique things which can provide a gainful market for such expertise people may develop. The foregoing axioms augment our understanding of creating a knowledge society. It emphasizes the need to put the theme of leading a meaningful live central to our pursuits of acquiring knowledge. If we can build a society with this perspective to knowledge we will not only solve economic problems of mankind but also sociological and psychological problems as well.