

The Forgotten Path of Knowledge

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The subject under discussion is "The Forgotten Path of Knowledge". We would, therefore, start by defining the word "Knowledge". We would define it as "clear perception of a truth or a fact". Again, "Knowledge" is not an "end", but a "means" to an end, and the immediate human end seems to comprise the acquisition of "good" and the avoidance of "evil".

To know and to understand is a natural yearning in man. As regards human consciousness and powers of perception, there are two distinct levels. One is that of direct perception or intuition where logical categories play no part. The other is that which is founded on sense-perception and theoretical reason.

Now, as regards consciousness, recent scientific investigation has led us to the belief that it does not only exist in human beings, but is also to be found in some form among animals, among plants, and even among the stones. The behaviour of the newly born fish as regards swimming and the behaviour of the cub to pounce upon the prey, leads us to the belief that they have been gifted by God with some form of consciousness. Similarly, the presence of the qualities of attraction and repulsion in certain plants gives us to understand that they, too, possess certain form of consciousness. To call such activity instinctive does not negate the existence of consciousness.

The human consciousness seems to be a richer variety. The human child is without doubt different from the offspring of other forms of creation. Its powers of perception and action do not appear to be so well set as those of the other species. But its struggle to harmonise its consciousness and activity with its environment begins soon after its birth. It opens its eyes and tries to see. It moves its hand and tries to grasp. It focuses its attention and wants to hear. That is, it brings into play its powers of sensation and perception, and tries to develop them in the light of its consciousness, The more these powers develop, the greater becomes his yearning to know things, until the ignorant child of yesterday becomes a great scientist or a great philosopher, talking about all things of the heavens and the earth and passing his judgment upon them.

In connection with this discussion of the different levels of knowledge I might relate here a simple incident. During my travels, I once visited the famous botanical gardens situated in Kandy, in the historic town of Ceylon. Some of my friends were also there with me along with their children who were of different ages. According to the rules, no one could pluck flowers. But children are not, as a rule, very law-abiding in such matters. Hence, a child who was six or seven years old plucked a rose flower, brought it to his father, and questioned him about it. This fondness for questioning among children is proof of the inherent yearning for knowledge existing in man. The father informed the child that it was a rose. This answer made the child happy. He had received a new piece of information. With pride he showed it to other children, saying: "See, it is rose." That flower was red in colour.

In the meantime, another child rushed towards a flower bed and plucked a flower, which was similar in form but possessed yellow colour. He, too, brought it to his father and asked him what it was. The father told him that it was a rose.

Now, this other child was a bit older than the first one. He, therefore, enquired how both flowers could be called by the same name while their colours were different. The father could not give a satisfactory reply. But the Superintendent of the garden, who was an Englishman, explained to the boy that one was the Indian variety, while the other was Australian. All the children seemed to be gratified and happy at this further piece of knowledge and started remarking about the beauty and the smell. Presently, one elderly boy asked the Superintendent about the use of those flowers. The Superintendent was still searching for a reply when a Maulvi Saheb (scholar), who had accompanied us, remarked that people prepare rose water and use it in religious assemblies and social functions for the sake of its fragrance. A statement followed this remark from an herbal doctor who informed that rose leaves were good for removing constipation and strengthening the heart. The Superintendent, who had kept quiet all the while, suddenly plucked a fresh flower and informed the children that there were pairs among flowers also, pointing out to the male and the female flower. The children were ultimately thrilled by all that information.

All the informants gave the information according to the extent of their knowledge. Had there been some eminent botanist or chemist among them, he would have given still further and higher information about the chemical constituents and properties. But all those who were there were enjoying the little discussion, and, finding them in their enjoyment, I asked them: "Did these flowers come into existence by themselves, or someone else created them?" There were different answers. Among the agencies held responsible, were mentioned: the planter, the sower, the irrigator, and the "mother earth". But when questioning ultimately exhausted the material causes, all cried out that God created them.

This was a new conception, a conception of reality, which is above and beyond the chain of causes, which is the uncaused First Cause. And how did we arrive at it? We arrived by considering the physical world itself and by plunging into the problem of its origin. Our investigation into the physical phenomena ultimately led us to God.

At this point I invited the attention of my friends to the fact that if the rose flower was so enchanting, how beautiful and perfect must be He Who made it, Who brought it into existence?

The little children who were with me could not show much interest in this because of their limited intelligence and undeveloped consciousness. But the elderly persons became thoughtful and appreciated the point.

Now, in this garden which we call the world, is it not a fact that there are persons who, in spite of their powerful intellects and their claim to be expert physicists and metaphysicists, behave no better than the children whom I referred to just now, contented and happy with the knowledge of a few

properties of a few flowers, or, to use the words of a great scientist, "a few pebbles on the shore"?

Today, the teachers of natural science hardly tell their students anything about the Great Architect who made all the things they investigate, and our great colleges and laboratories of science have simply ruled out the very thought of the Supreme Creator. In the discussions of moral philosophy we come across sometimes the idea of God, and certain schools of metaphysics refer to His Existence. But is there any school, any University, any Laboratory, which devotes itself to the Really Real, to the discussion of His Attributes and His Person, and to the knowledge of the ways and means of attaining nearness to Him? If such institutions do not exist, (and they do not exist in fact), would it not be true to say that those who claim to possess great intellects are actually behaving like children? They are playing with the toys and running after the shadows, and have abandoned the search for the Great Reality which should have been their goal of investigation. And, not only have they forsaken the road which leads to the knowledge of God, they have also forgotten the deeper paths which lead to the true understanding of human personality itself.

Before his death, Aristotle left an advice for posterity and ordered it to be inscribed on the walls of his academy. Other great men, before him and after him, gave the same advice. The advice was "O Man know thyself!"

The purpose of the advice was and is that we should try to understand our own selves, should discover and cultivate those powers which have been given to us for penetrating the reality of things, and should ultimately attain to the knowledge of God.

But how many are those in the world who pay their attention to this problem today? People do go to the houses of worship. But in most cases their approach is formal and ritualistic. Do they achieve the end for which worship has been instituted? Are there any persons who have devoted themselves to these problems?

Dear readers! The importance which a thing enjoys in human life, its knowledge shall also enjoy the same importance, and those who possess that knowledge shall also be graded accordingly.

Similarly, if man is superior to all created things, the importance and status of the knowledge which relates to him and the possessors of that knowledge, must be assessed accordingly.

There are two aspects of the knowledge about man. One aspect is physical, and refers to his physical constitution, nutrition and the abnormalities to which his physique becomes subject sometimes. This last item of investigation gives birth to the science of medicine. Those who devote themselves to this science are called physicians. There is no doubt that the science of human cure is a noble science and ranks high in importance and those who devote themselves to it also deserve great respect if their motive is that of service.

But, here a question arises: "is man only an aggregate of bones and flesh?" If it is so, even the dead man possesses flesh and bones. But we call him a dead body, and do not consider him the whole man. Our very first thought about a dead human body makes us feel that there was something essential which is no more there. That something was life. And we are sure that it is not only the flesh and the bones but life also which combined together can be properly called man.

Now, what is life? When we speak this word, we are confronted with a number of conceptions, and the fact is that we, in spite of all our scientific researches, have so far failed in discovering the "reality of life." The word "soul" is only a name. What the soul actually is and how it is to be defined, the scientific world has not succeeded so far in telling us that.

Our great scientists are silent on this problem. Either they are, so to say, playing with external things and do not pay attention to the basic reality at all, or they pay attention and find themselves incompetent.

Huxley, who enjoys a distinct status in the fields of science and philosophy, admits in clear words that: "About the soul we cannot say anything more than that it is the name of a supposed state".

We might now ask: if we fail in discovering our own reality by empirical means and if we feel contented with that failure, can we be regarded to have been faithful to the natural yearning for knowledge existing in us? This yearning requires us not to confine our efforts to certain preconceived means but to employ all other means available. For, without that basic knowledge, we can neither consider ourselves nor our knowledge as perfect.

If we go further, we come across the next problem, that is, the problem of knowing the great "source of life" or, in the language of Sir Oliver Lodge, the Unknown. That is the point where the scientists and the philosophers stop, after their strenuous search of causal connection, and at best describe it as the Cause of all causes or the Primary Intellect.

The fact is that there are numerous universities in the world. They have separate faculties for teaching the various subjects like history, geography, physics, chemistry, mathematics, etc. They have separate laboratories for scientific research. But is there any such university or college or school where man could receive proper instruction about the reality of his "Inner Self", and about the "Great Reality" which pervades the whole universe? How can the gates of this knowledge be opened? Where can we find the Path of this Knowledge?

Allow me to say, and to say with all the force at my command, that there is only ONE Institution where this knowledge can be obtained, namely, the Institution of Revealed Religion.

The information, which is given to us there, is not based on whim and fancy, guess and conjecture, sense-perception and logical deduction. Nay, that Path of Knowledge is entirely different. It is a path of direct perception. The knowledge emanates from the "Great Reality" and descends upon the human heart in a

special spiritual manner. We have, of course, the right to judge it with our reason and to see to it that it is not mere 'dogma' or 'mystery' but something real and true, whenever anyone gives it to us and claims that he has received it direct from God.

However, before accepting it, my readers shall surely like to know the nature of *Wahy* (Revelation) and *Ilham* (Inspiration). They would like to understand that they are not synonymous with superstition but something tangible and real. They would further like to know the criterion with which to judge the genuineness of certain claims regarding Revelation. Then, they would like to know whether Revelation has reference only to the world of 'abstract things' or whether it can also relate to our practical life and can contribute to our practical well-being. If it is so, it will become necessary to pay attention to it and to take practical steps for the acquisition of that knowledge. The acquisition of that knowledge will further necessitate a complete and comprehensive course of Instruction.

So far we have been trying to rediscover the "Forgotten Path of Knowledge". Now we shall probe into the nature of Divine Revelation and Spiritual Perception and the ways and means relating to them.

We have been blessed with different organs for the purpose of knowing material things, and every one of these organs has a distinct function. With regard to these organs the physiologist finds himself confronted with a very vital question, namely, whether they are self-motivated, or they are merely mediums for some faculty which works behind them.

When we consider these organs we find that they have different functions divided among them. Every individual organ performs only that function for which it is meant, and this "specialisation of function" exists in such rigid form that if a certain organ is compelled to perform some function for which it is not meant, it will not perform it and will, moreover, get spoiled very soon. Thus, the tongue only tastes and does not see; the eyes only see and do not smell; the ears only hear and do not speak; the hands only grip and cannot perform the function of the feet.

Now, we are confronted with a question: Do we ever experience any such state in our life when our consciousness is active and we have perceptions while our organs of knowledge are inactive? I would remind you in this connection of your state when, after the day's toil, you are resting on your soft bed, your eyes are closed, your hands and feet are enjoying a well-earned repose, your ears are indifferent to the sounds vibrating around them, your muscles are relaxed; in short, your whole physical being is in a state of inactivity. This inactivity increases until you are plunged in "deep sleep" and become fully dissociated in your consciousness from the physical world.

You are asleep. You are, evidently, in a state of unconsciousness. But it is a strange type of unconsciousness. Your eyes are closed, but you see. Your ears are inactive but you hear. Your tongue is not moving, but you speak. You walk. You are active. You eat and drink. You have the feelings of happiness and grief, of heat and cold, of sweet and bitter tastes. You are subject to hopes and fears.

In short, you have all those experiences that you have in your waking life. And not only that you have those experiences, but you can also remember them just like your experiences in waking state.

You call this state the "state of dream". But who is the actual subject of this state? Is it we ourselves or someone else? And, if we ourselves are its subject, does it not clearly show that while we possess the power to perform actions with the help of our organs and to derive experience from it, we can have similar experience without employing those organs'?

One might say that we started with a talk of reason and consciousness and now we are discussing things which are dreamy. And, about the dreams, one might think that just as in our waking state, thoughts come and wander about our minds and make us happy or grieved, similarly, during our sleep, though our organs of sensation are inactive, yet our digestive organs and the heart are active, and the imaginative faculty is active too, and, therefore, all those experiences which we have in our dreams are merely phantoms of thought and nothing more.

We might stay in this thought for a moment. But let us transport our imagination from the physical world to that vast world which is called the "World of Thought". In that world we transcend time, and we get this experience of transcending time on a vaster scale during our dreams. How often it happens that we close our eyes at 12 o'clock and in our dream we pass through a vast panorama of events in the background of the past and we experience things in the perspective of the future. And when we have finished our journey on the long road of time, and open our eyes, and cast a glance at the clock on the wall in front of us, we find that we have been asleep only, say, for 10 minutes. What is this mystery? If all this is mere thought, does thought also possess the power whereby we may be able to see the events of the past and the future with full consciousness, while our sense-organs are in a state of suspension of activity?

One might consider it the work of the "imaginative faculty". The exactness of this term may not be challenged just now. It may, however, be remarked in passing that in the terminology of the experts of metaphysical and psychological problems, the experience which one has in the state of deep sleep when even the imaginative faculty becomes virtually suspended, is termed as a flash of Spiritual Consciousness. That is, the perception which one has in such a state is "spiritual perception" if it is free from those elements which should be considered as products of imagination. We have not yet arrived at that stage of discussion. Hence we might first consider the problem that "the knowledge of oneself can be based only on the knowledge of one's qualities or attributes".

We just realised that in our being there is a faculty that can help us in traversing certain stages of consciousness and perception without employing the sense organs. Some people like to call it the imaginative faculty and consider the brain as its seat. But we should try to go further. If we analyse the state of sleep, we will find that sometimes, during this state, we get certain stray and uncoordinated experiences like those we have while day-dreaming. But sometimes our experience is highly integrated and has a meaning. It may be

compared to that experience in waking life when we close our faculties of perception from all sides; concentrate our thought and focus it powerfully on a fixed point; dive deep into the infinite ocean of thought, and find ourselves transported to a world which is very much of a different character than this material world in which we live and move.

The scientist, when he is absorbed in his scientific pursuit and concentrates with full effort on a certain problem penetrates into the mysteries and brings back to us valuable gems of knowledge.

The Philosopher fastens to his being the wings of logical premises; closes his minds to all ulterior considerations; soars into the vast expanse of thought and opens before us new and fascinating paths. This has been mentioned here only to invite attention to the fact that the preliminary condition of research in the domain of higher realities is complete concentration and undivided interest. It is this, again, which gives us great discoveries in the domains of science and philosophy. It is this whereby the mesmeriser and the hypnotiser bring about a transformation in the "thought-world" of his subject. Thus the suspension of the activity of sense-organs and the complete concentration of mind is the starting point of our activity on the path of knowledge.

We have so far considered the worlds of science and philosophy. Now let us concentrate our attention on that point of thought that refers to the Self-Existing Being. A logician, a philosopher and a scientist can say about Him merely that He is. But in the school of Religion we get practical lessons for the purposes of knowing Him and attaining nearness to Him. In this connection, the first lesson is: "Divert your attention away from all things and concentrate it on the idea of God." And this concentration should be such that, firstly, your mind should be empty of all other thoughts, and, secondly all your organs should suspend their activity except in so far as it is in conformity with your mental attitude at the time.

To focus attention on God with this complete concentration is known in religious terminology as Worship. In this state, the created thing considers himself the slave of the Creator and devotes himself solely to Him, at least during certain special moments.

This is the first exercise or that discipline which forms the basis of the cultivation of the Spiritual Faculty, known among Philosophers as Intuition. We have now arrived at a new term, i.e. the "Spiritual Faculty", and the readers must naturally be impatient to know its function and the benefits that are to be derived from its cultivation. We will try to understand it through an illustration:

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What shall we do if we are confronted with the problem of finding out the taste of an orange and the quality of pleasantness inherent in its taste? Shall we succeed if we employ our hand? No. We shall have to employ our tongue, and that, too, under certain prescribed conditions. The tongue should not be dirty. It should be perfectly clean. It should have no aftertastes - saltish or sweet - of things that have been eaten before. In short, it should be a neutral recipient of taste. Let us then put the orange into the mouth and allow the juice to be absorbed in the pores of the tongue so completely that our tongue itself may

become, so to say, a piece of orange. Then we shall have a complete realisation of the taste of the orange and its pleasantness.

Similarly, if we wish to know the coolness of ice, the only way open to us is to take a piece of ice in our hand, and the correct idea of icy coolness will come to us when the temperature of our hand falls approximately to the temperature of the ice.

Now, I may say without attempting a complete analogy that, if we empty the mind of all ideas and thoughts, concentrate it with singleness of purpose and attention on God, have no external form even as a formal focus of attention, keep our mind free of "minor gods" or associates of God, and cleanse our imaginative faculty, or, in the terminology of the Sufis, the Spiritual Faculty, of all external or internal influences, then the perception of the Divine Attributes will dawn and the veil of ignorance will be removed.

If anyone questions us about the taste of the orange, try as we may, but we will not be able to translate the exact taste and its inherent pleasant quality into words. We know it ourselves as a direct experience but words cannot define and express that experience or the experience of a spiritual reality like the Divine Attributes. We can only have the experience but we cannot describe it truly. As for its genuineness and its beauty, even those who confine their effort to the very first exercise mentioned before can have an experience of it which is simply unique.

But, remember, the ultimate aim is not only the experience of the taste and its pleasantness. If we eat an orange we will not only add to the experiences of our tongue, but we will at the same time provide nourishment to our body which will ultimately help us in performing great many things. In the same way, though not as a perfect analogy, when we perform the spiritual exercise mentioned above our spiritual faculty will develop. And, just as the development of physical power gives us the strength to overcome infirmities and attacks of diseases and enables us to enjoy a more complete physical existence, we will gain in spiritual power by focusing our attention on God with single-minded concentration. This increase in spiritual power will lead us towards spiritual perfection, which will manifest itself in high and sublime morals and will enable us to fight those diseases that arise in the moral sphere. And the more we advance on that path, the nearer we will be to the concept of the "Perfect Man".

This is the "Forgotten Path of Knowledge". If we traverse this path, the doors of real knowledge will open before us and we will receive the clear perception of truth. Moreover, as pointed out at the very outset, knowledge is a means and not an end, and the immediate end is the attainment of good and avoidance of evil.

Islam has defined Worship by saying, in the words of the Holy Qur'an:

“Verily Prayer safeguards against indecencies and evil actions; and, indeed, God's remembrance is the greatest (good)”

Thus, if the process of focusing attention upon God continues and this exercise is performed at certain intervals during the day and the night, even though for short moments, it will produce a two-fold result. On the one hand, we shall have a realisation of our own selves, a clear grasp of the reality of the soul, and a perception of the Attributes of the Supreme Being. On the other hand, our belief in God that He is the Creator of the Universe and that He is Omnipresent and Omniscient, will be transformed from mere words into a practical and living reality, which will ultimately become a sure means for withholding us from committing cruelties, injustices and indecencies and, in fact, all those deeds which take us away from the higher levels of humanity or bring us down to the beastly standards.

Dear Readers! Every teacher of physical sciences urges his students to perform practical experiments after they have learnt the theory, and it is those experiments in the Laboratory that make the knowledge of the student ultimately perfect. Similarly, when we teach metaphysics in the school of Religion and give theoretical explanations of such realities as soul or God, we invite humanity to the spiritual laboratory and tell them about the methods of performing practical experiments. Let it be emphasised that just as we can test the correctness of the scientific theory about water by practically preparing water with the help of oxygen and hydrogen, we can similarly test the theory of religion regarding worship and its practical results in reforming our moral life and in illuminating our personality. But before experimenting with the exercise to which reference has been made, it is necessary to have the theoretical foundations of our approach corrected. For, if the premises are not correct, the conclusion also will be wrong. Similarly, if a certain formula is imperfect, the result will be nil. Hence, the very first lesson that we receive in the school of genuine religion is directed to the correction of our belief in the Supreme Reality. The success of our pursuit of the religious path of knowledge depends upon the preliminary correct faith-attitude, namely, that God is One and One Only. That religion alone is true which is based on genuine and authentic revelation from God, and which teaches, side by side, with perfect and pure Monotheism, that all human beings whether men or women, black or white, wealthy or poor, high-placed or lowly, are equal in their humanity and in their essential relation with God.