

## II

# *The Purpose of Knowledge*

by Swami Tejomayananda

The words *education* and *knowledge* have a general meaning and also a special meaning as indicated in the scriptures. Here I would like to explain the words from a spiritual point of view. We generally understand education to mean schooling, and we say, “We are giving our children the best education.” We do not say, “We are giving them the best knowledge.” Our educational system can provide data and information, but it does not give students a direction and a higher goal to strive for. And when there is no ideal, there is no further progress or development of character. Thus education prepares us to live only one aspect of life but it does not really help us to discover the truth of life itself. Knowledge, on the other hand, prepares us to face life squarely and brings about a transformation within ourselves. Therefore the purpose of true education is to lead a person to that knowledge by which he can discover the truth for himself.

Shankaracharya gave the purpose of knowledge in one very precise statement. He said that *the result of knowledge is the elimination of falsehood*. This implies that if we understand something as false, we withdraw ourselves from it. When our understanding changes our wrong behavior also ends. The following example will illustrate this: While walking on the road, a man saw a small glittering object. Thinking that it was a precious piece of silver he picked it up. On further inspection, however, he realized that it was only a piece of rock wrapped in silver paper. Thinking that it was silver, he had picked it up, but the moment that he discovered that it was not silver (true knowledge) he threw the rock away (false concept was eliminated). He will now forget all about the incident and will never mention it to anyone because no one likes to talk about his mistakes. This shows that when real knowledge takes place there will also be humility, because after a person discovers the truth, he simply realizes how foolish he has been.

Thus the true purpose of knowledge is to eliminate all false notions. Up until now we have based our lives upon certain concepts, many of which are false, and therefore the activity arising from them is also false. Some of those false concepts are that we are the body, or that money gives us security, or that all pleasures derived through our sense organs can make us truly happy. When we awaken to true Knowledge, however, all of our sufferings come to an end, and this Knowledge in Sanskrit is called *jñāna*.

### *Classifying Knowledge*

The *Bhagavad Gītā* classifies knowledge according to three different visions, technically termed as *sāttvika jñāna*, *rājasika jñāna* and *tāmasika jñāna*. *Sāttvika jñāna* is the highest knowledge, and *tāmasika jñāna* is the lowest. What then is this true Knowledge, the highest Knowledge?

Our gross and subtle bodies are the medium through which we contact the outer world. When we look through them we see the variety and duality of this world; this is their function. But

while seeing this variety, if we are able to see the one Reality pervading all these differences — to recognize the One in the many — this is called the highest Knowledge.

Our physical body is a good example of this idea. We see that there are many different parts — the hands, the fingers, the stomach, the head, and the legs — but even though the parts are many, we know that this entire body is *me*. We do understand the concept of the oneness in regards to the body and that is why, if somebody touches our back, we will not say, “Why are you touching *my back*?” We will say, “Why are you touching *me*?” As one entity, I am pervading all the parts. The highest Knowledge, or *sāttvika jñāna* then, is to be able to see the one Reality that pervades through all the names and forms of the universe.

The lower or *rājasika* knowledge sees and understands each thing as being distinct and separate from every other object. For example, an optometrist studies only the eyes and a painter notices only color and form. Most of us do not see the world as a whole or in totality but consider all things to be separate and unrelated to each other. That is why we say *my house*, *my share*, *your share*, and so on. Though the Lord has created only one earth and space, the world has divided it into nations, countries, and even different national “air spaces!” This is called *rājasika* knowledge.

The lowest knowledge is called *tāmasika jñāna*. This is where one takes a certain part of the whole and gets very attached to that one object, view, or belief. For example, the feeling that my path alone is right, yours is wrong, my religion is right, yours is wrong. This is the lowest vision or attitude toward life. The person with *tāmasika* knowledge is intolerant and fanatical, and the person who thinks so narrowly will always be agitated. On the other hand, if one has the vision of oneness, if one has *sāttvika jñāna*, one’s attitude and behavior will be extremely noble and peaceful.

### *Love and Service to All*

The same attitude that we have towards our physical body can also be applied to higher Knowledge. Suppose, while talking, my finger accidentally pokes my eye. Will I not use the very same finger to rub my eye and console it? I will not cut off the finger and throw it away because it has hurt my eye. Similarly, if the teeth accidentally bite the tongue we do not break the teeth in order to punish them. I have no hatred towards my teeth and no desire to hurt them because the teeth are also a part of myself and are just as dear to me as every other part of the body. Thus we see that where there is a sense of oneness we are raised immediately to an attitude of *love* for everything. When there is love for all, service to all automatically manifests.

Today we are not able to serve, not because there is no love, but because the sense of oneness is not there. This vision of oneness is called true Knowledge or Wisdom. Throughout our formal education, we must be led to this highest Knowledge, which will bring about a transformation within ourselves. If one person changes, he can change the world around him. Although there have been few saints and sages, yet each of them has had a great influence upon many people. The wise man hates none and is a friend to all. When that vision of oneness comes, our lives will be totally changed. Do not wait for others to change, begin with yourself. You are the world and the world is not different from you. Change your attitude, and your vision of the world will change. Everything will be peaceful and good. This is the non-dualism of Vedanta. This is the highest Knowledge and true Wisdom.