

Wisdom and Science

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Bhagavad Gita, which means Divine Song, is one of the oldest and much respected philosophical texts of India. In this most elegant poem many profound ideas are presented in a delightfully simple manner. One such idea is that of total integrity and interconnection between wisdom and science. Some may think that “science” is a western invention but the Bhagavad Gita embraced the idea of science nearly 4,000 years ago!

In the Gita two words, “gyanam” and “vigyanam” always appear together, as if they are identical twins. One cannot exist without the other. These two potent words are pregnant with deep and broad meaning.

To put it simply, *gyanam* means inner and intuitive knowledge or wisdom and *vigyanam* means outer and measured knowledge or science. *Gyanam* arises out of experience and practice and *vigyanam* is obtained through experience and observation. *Gyanam* is spiritual knowledge and *vigyanam* is the knowledge of matter.

As *gyanam* and *vigyanam* always appear together, they cannot be separated; there is no dualism, matter is imbibed by the spirit and spirit embodies the matter. In other words, spirit manifests through observable phenomena, through reason, analysis and definition, whereas *gyanam* dwells in the mystery of meaning always unfolding, emerging and being discovered but never final, never fixed; *gyanam* is a flowing phenomena. *Vigyanam* concerns itself with objects while *gyanam* focuses on the relationship between objects and thus concentrates on the subject. For *gyanam* all and everything is a subject but, in order to make sense of the world, *vigyanam* is required to objectify the material world, thus *gyanam* seeks quality while through *vigyanam* we define *quantity*.

Without *gyanam* or wisdom, *vigyanam* or science, loses its ethical and visionary element and can easily lead to militarism, commercialism and exploitation or even destruction of the natural world. Through *gyanam*, science is guided into the sphere of ethics, harmony and beauty while through science, *gyanam* is held back from turning into dogma, fundamentalism and literalism.

Science without wisdom seeks to work mainly in the human interest and gives birth to technologies of comfort and convenience, as well as control and consumerism. Science denuded of deep values and the human spirit follows the lead given by money and materialism. Such science works for those who can pay for it and does not accept any constraints or limits in its domination of nature to meet insatiable human appetites – particularly the greed of a powerful and privileged elite – very often at a great cost to other forms of life. A dispirited science is more likely to be misused and exploited by vested interests. So, science without wisdom is not only incomplete, it is also vulnerable and even dangerous.

On the other hand, wisdom without science is also incomplete. In the name of wisdom it is easier to fall prey to otherworldliness and this gives birth to institutionalised religions, blind faith and fundamentalism. Wisdom without concerns to human affairs follows the lead given by gurus, priests and missionaries who promise their followers a place in heaven and inject the fear of hell – thus exploiting the natural human urge for spiritual fulfillment.

Science without spirituality or wisdom has ill-served the Earth and spirituality without science has degenerated into dogmatic exclusivity.

We need to reconcile the split between intuition and reason, between cognition and consciousness, and between the inner and the outer. Taken together they make a strong case for connectivity and wholeness. While science can offer practical tools and knowledge for living, wisdom can offer meaning. We need both. When a rich mixture of science and wisdom is available to us, why should we think in terms of ‘either/or’? Why not ‘both/and’? Why not celebrate the unity of physics and metaphysics, information and transformation, human ingenuity and imagination, Galileo and Gandhi, Einstein and Aquinas? **Yes: the best of both worlds!**

When only nine years old, Satish Kumar renounced the world and joined the wandering brotherhood of Jain monks. At the age of eighteen, he left the monastic order and became a campaigner, working to turn Gandhi’s vision of renewed India and a peaceful world into reality. Fired by the example of Bertrand Russell, he undertook an 8,000 mile peace pilgrimage, walking from India to America without any money delivering packets of ‘peace tea’ to the leaders of the four nuclear powers. Since 1973, he has been the Editor of Resurgence magazine. www.resurgence.org

