From Ignorance through science to wisdom

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“The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.”

– Socrates.

One of my e-mail patients, Jayashree Nair, sent me a few quotes from Aurobindo, one of our venerated sages. Some of them beat even the latest quantum physics dictates. I shall quote some of them for the reader’s benefit and then we shall debate the significance of ignorance, science, and wisdom in that order. I shall also quote some of the celebrated scientists, most of them Nobel recipients, to buttress the argument for a connection between all these three, more for the benefit of the RNI (resident non-Indian) thinkers here.

Ignorance

Ignorance, they say, is bliss. This might have been a superstition but it is true in today’s medical world which has become a “corporate monstrosity” and the claptrap there will confuse the best brains to make them hypochondriacs. As Richard Feynman, a Nobel physicist said “The first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool.” In today’s environment if you try to find out something about disease and its remedies, you will soon be fooled. The medical world has found millions of ways to confuse and trap you in their net. Lay people think that they are ignorant about that hallowed word “science”; the very mention of the word makes even cow dung become a medicine. The food industry uses this trick to sell their dangerous junk foods as scientifically proven for this or that disease! The higher you go up the conventional schooling system, the bigger is your ego to eat only scientifically proven healthy food and scientifically proven other methods of lifestyle.

What is this “science”? Definitions vary from such simple ones like “science is measurement and measurement is science” by Marie Curie to such complicated ones like: “science is the belief in the ignorance of experts...” by Richard Feynman. There again ignorance raises its ugly head. The best assessment of science was done by Aurobindo during his time. “Medical Science has been more of a curse to mankind than a blessing. It has broken the force of epidemics and unveiled a marvellous surgery; but, also, it has weakened the natural health of man and multiplied individual diseases; it has implanted fear and dependence in the mind and body; it has taught our health to repose not on natural soundness but a rickety and distasteful crutch compact from the mineral and vegetable kingdoms.” How true?

A very recent study in four universities – Oxford, Cambridge, Hamburg, and Munich – clearly showed that it is the “Placebo effect; the faith of the patient in the doctor and his medicines, that heals. This study was led by Professor Bingel of Oxford University. Look at what Aurobindo has to say about faith and its role in healing? “We laugh at the savage for his faith in the medicine man; but how are the civilised less superstitious who have faith in the doctors? The savage finds that when a certain incantation is repeated, he often recovers from a certain disease; he believes. The civilised patient finds that when he doses himself according to a certain prescription, he often recovers from a certain disease; he believes. Where is the difference? One could say in conclusion that it is the faith of the patient which gives the remedy its power to heal. If men had an absolute faith in the healing power of Grace, they would perhaps avoid many illnesses.”

In his recent TED talk Mark Plotkin, an ethnobotanist, brings out this remarkable truth which tells us that the best science is yet to be discovered! “The greatest and most endangered species in the Amazon rainforest is not the jaguar or the harpy eagle. It’s the isolated and uncontacted tribes.” He brings us into the world of the “forest’s indigenous tribes and the incredible medicinal plants that their shamans use to heal. He describes the “challenges and perils” that endanger them. He rightly urges the world to protect this irreplaceable repository of wisdom.

Now let me ask the reader which one of these is science and which superstition? Aurobindo goes on to add that the “healthiest ages of mankind were those in which there were the fewest material remedies. We ought to use the divine health in us to cure and prevent diseases; but Galen and Hippocrates and their tribe have given us instead an armoury of drugs and a barbarous Latin hocus-pocus as

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Science and knowledge

"Science is simply making models, mathematical constructs, which with verbal jargon are supposed to work," wrote John von Newman, a Hungarian born American Nobel-winning chemist! Consequently, science is another one of those human enterprises, like religion, which has its inbuilt limitations. Peter Medawar, another Nobel Laureate medical scientist in his classic *The Limits of Science* goes on to say that science is designed for some limited purpose and thus can answer mundane questions. When it comes to esoteric questions like origin of life or of this world, the nature of God and end of life, etc., science is powerless to answer! His analogy is very telling. Science is built like a railway engine and if asked to fly like an aeroplane it naturally fails to do so, he adds. Being a venerable scientist, he hastens to add that his statement should not be misconstrued as to mean that science is powerless. He feels science has served its purpose very well. I beg to differ there. Science, which has now tagged itself on to technology, is today running after big money and, therefore, has lost its way. Money runs science and research today to the detriment of the humanity's needs. Many of the technologies are killer technologies says a friend of mine, a distinguished BARC nuclear scientist. Positive sciences have become so reductionist that they cannot look at the whole at all. Reductionist science, nay vivisectionist science, brings in money for the industry and, as such, is being patronised by the money bags with liberal grants, expecting something in return. The research, thus, becomes subservient to grant givers' interests. Today's big scientists are those that succeed in getting the largest grants and then producing scientific papers like the magician bringing out pigeons from his hat, fattening his/her CV. Of course, prizes and awards are an added attraction.

Science must basically be the curiosity to try and understand nature. Lately, thanks to technology, science took on itself the role of teaching nature a lesson or two. That is where it got derailed completely. The science of genetics went on to teach human genes some tricks to make money in the name of genetic engineering, stem cell research, cloning, producing self-replicating nanobots to beget offsprings without parents, etc. Similarly in physics billions of dollars are being wasted to find out the basic building particles of this universe, the so called Goddem or God particle, the Higg's Boson. About a year ago when the last grant amount was coming to an end at the CERN reactors, there appeared a flurry of news items about the foundation of the universe, the God particle being discovered with almost 99.9% certainty. Now it is forgotten and no one talks about it. Are there particles at all? Human memory being short people forgot about that particle. The only certainty in this universe is uncertainty, thanks to Werner Heisenberg who discovered it in 1925 through Gedanken experiment – a thought experiment – in the best laboratory in the world, the human mind.

Science is ceaseless change like life itself. So there is nothing called THE TRUTH in science. There could be A TRUTH at a given time. If science finds its Holy Grail, there will be no more enterprise called science. Science, therefore, is not the end in itself. It is knowledge and so is very proud and arrogant because it knows so much! Science dwells in heads replete with thoughts of other men, books, journals, and what have you; rarely does it dwell in heads attentive to their own...

Wisdom

Wisdom, on the contrary, is humble as it knows no more. Many great scientists have become wiser at the end of the day and have reached similar conclusions that Sri Aurobindo preached from the internal engineering of his mind. Science has made the external world to progress at breakneck speed with highways, rockets, landings on the moon and mars, organ transplants, vertical living facilities, bombs, terrorists, submarines, planes, and more – thanks to its arrogance of success it seems to think that it can even teach nature some lessons. Life on earth though has become very difficult these days with human atrocities against fellow humans in all spheres of activity from economics, health, governance, and what have you. Little do we realise that the basic principle of life on earth is its interconnectedness. The "I" (illness) concept has taken over from the more natural "we" (wellness) concept to end this world sooner than later. Materialism has replaced spirituality in every walk of life. William Wordsworth, that romantic British poet, wrote as far back as 1802 in his poem, *The World Is Too Much With Us*, that we have sold our soul, (to the Devil) a sordid boon. If mankind has to survive here, we need to re-engineer our inner development with wisdom and spirituality. The simple meaning of spirituality is simple sharing and caring. That needs wisdom.

Science also has revealed an astonishing interconnectedness of things, starting with Newton's principle of universal gravitation, where all bodies in the universe influence one another. The field theories, evolutionary theory, quantum physics, Gaia theory, and modern cosmology, new principles of interconnectedness, if understood properly with humility, seem to link separate systems into a larger whole. Some sagely thinkers in science, like Sri Aurobindo, seem to go a bit too far to reveal previously unsuspected links between the realms of the
subjective and objective. Mind is not just confined to the human brain but is a part of the universal consciousness. May be the minds can connect the present with the past. What looks on the surface to be a duality is in fact, at a deeper level, non-dual. Non-dualism, which he compares with Advaita, is at the core of the thinking of one of the leading living sages of science, Hans Peter Durr, emeritus director of the Max Planck Institute in Munich.

Reality in the true sense, according to quantum laws, is not something we can touch and comprehend. We can comprehend much more than we can grasp. Reality is an “immaterial wholeness ‘Gestalt’, pure interconnectedness, inseparable potentiality, comparable to the mental sphere,” feels Hans Peter Durr. It corresponds to a holistic and unified process of action. Paul Brunton, a British philosopher, mystic and a traveller, wrote that: “I knew however that the forest thinkers of Asiatic countries had leisurely pondered this problem long before the first city Greeks had begun to ponder it in Europe. Moreover, there was this vital difference that whereas the Western thinkers usually claimed that nobody had discovered ultimate truth and that human limitations were so narrow that nobody was likely to discover it, the authors of old Asiatic books (Indian Sages) claimed that ultimate truth was certainly discoverable and that a few sages had definitely known it. Even an erudite quantum physicist like Erwin Schrodinger feels that: “the multiplicity is only apparent. This is the doctrine of the Upanishads. And not of the Upanishads only. The mystical experience of the union with God regularly leads to this view, unless strong prejudices stand in the West.” Ramana Maharishi, a great Indian sage had this to say about the “I” concept referred to above:

“Sooner or later the question of ‘Who am I’ will have to be faced. All [practice] that leads to this question is good. For, by itself, nothing else is fully effective since Self-knowledge comes only through Self-Inquiry. Other methods purify the mind and help it to see its own limits. When the mind comes to the end of its resources, and stands baffled before the unanswerable question, then a Higher Power takes charge of the mind and the Self stands revealed as the real, the wonderful.”

One can feel the oneness between the East and West when one is able to go into the human mind. I strongly feel that Rudyard Kipling was wrong when he wrote that “the East is east and the West is west; the Twain shall never meet.” I would have modified it thus for the good of mankind as we have seen above: The East is east and the West is west, but it will be the BEST when they both meet. This new wisdom if put into practice can send all of us to our neighbours’ houses with a broad smile on our face to have a cup of tea instead of sending terrorists to blast their homes and try to send man to moon instead as we are likely to raze all “homes” to the ground with our hatred and jealousy. Wisdom will make us tranquil and feel one with others, the ultimate need of the hour for the survival of our race on this planet, which is true even in quantum physics. Science becomes wisdom when the arrogant scientist realises that he is not omnipotent. The common saying goes thus: “A wise man knows he is a fool while a fool always thinks that he is wise.”

“Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson.

“Do not resent growing old...
Many are denied the privilege.”

- OLD IRISH PROVERB.