What is wisdom?

WHAT IS WISDOM?


Out of the 133 chapters in the sacred Kural, Valluvar has allocated four chapters to Education – under the headings of Learning, Illiteracy, Listening and Possession of Wisdom. Of course, there are many instances elsewhere in Thirukkural where he has stressed the importance of education. Education is the manifestation of knowledge already in man said Swami Vivekananda. Man is endowed with knowledge when he is born. It is already there in every-human being. It is latent, not patent, and covered with various layers of impurities. These layers differ in density from person to person. The purpose and aim of education is to allow that knowledge to manifest itself. Thiruvalluvar has succinctly stated this philosophy of education in the following couplet

“The more the sandy spring is dug up, more water wells up in it. The more men learn, the more of wisdom will there manifest.”

The parallel used by Thiruvalluvar is worthy of admiration. When we dig up a well we use a spade, crowbar, pick axe and even dynamite for breaking and clearing mass that prevents the spring from issuing forth. But the tools and the aids that are used to break up the soil and the rock do not form part of the spring and they bring the spring forth. The implements help only to the extent of removing the mass of earth, gravel and rock that stand between the surface and the spring. In the English language, the word “educate” comes from the Latin word educare, which means to bring out.

Let us now go back to the second limb of the couplet under consideration. The wisdom of a man manifests to the extent to which he learns. So, now comes the question, “What is education?” Luckily in the foregoing lines we have made Swami Vivekananda answer this question. We acquire numeracy and literacy; we learn logic, drawing, art, dance, music and so on and so forth; and some of us excel in some or many of them. But the eminence and excellence we attain is not wisdom. According to Thiruvalluvar these acquisitions are only aids comparable to the tools used in the digging up of the well. Even as how the tools used in the digging cannot be equated with the spring, so also in the sphere of knowledge, academic acquisitions cannot be equated with wisdom. The truth is that the former is only an aid to the realisation of the latter. Thus, the purpose of education is the blooming or the unfolding of the supreme knowledge called Gnanam or Wisdom. But, unfortunately, we puny creatures who have acquired a little bit of knowledge here and there which is allowed to run riot, masquerade as intellectuals and pundits forgetting that we have only collected a few tools that are needed for the purpose of making Wisdom well up.

The above couplet may appear to slip the grip of comprehension. But it deserves to be cogitated over. In understanding this particular couplet, what is to be borne in mind is that Wisdom which Valluvar calls Airivu in chaste Tamil is not something that is
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gathered, but something that manifests within. In the couplet we must mark the word *Oorum* (ஒரும்) - which means issuing forth or springing.

As we have seen above, **Wisdom is already there in all human beings, and it is this pure knowledge that is needed for one to become perfect and divine.** In some human beings the impurity that covers Wisdom is so dense and hard that much effort is needed to enable this Wisdom to issue forth. Most of us belong to this category.

In few others, this impurity is so thin and light that Wisdom begins to issue forth with the least effort. It is these precious few that we call prodigies. Now the question may arise as to what accounts for the variation and difference in the amount of impurity that surrounds the Wisdom in different individuals. An effort to give an answer to this question might take us deep into the ocean of metaphysics. Suffice it to say that our *Karma* decides that. It may be interesting to remember that Saint Thirugnanasampanthar became a *Gnaani* when he was three years old; but it took decades for Appar to become. Further, is it not true that in Jaffna (in Sri Lanka) some wells are 10 feet deep while some others about 40 feet deep. In the former, the spring can be sighted with the least effort whereas in the latter, a Herculean effort is required before the spring can be sighted. In fine it may be said that Valluvar stresses the importance of academic acquisition, which is a sine qua non for the manifestation of Wisdom.

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*This article is one of the 41 Chapters of the book, The Ethical Essence of the Tamils, 1993 by the author. This book contains excellent commentaries on 40 Thirukurrals.*

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