

How to develop clearer thinking

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Clarity of thought makes life easier. A Vedanta teacher has some handy advice on how to banish fuzziness.

We live in the midst of an information explosion. Facts and figures get thrown about; opinion makers never seem to agree on anything, and if that wasn't enough, there is the university of Whatsapp. In this sea of information, what is right and what is wrong? Difficult to tell. Often, even knowing the facts of the case, doesn't help us.

All the facts in the world are only as good as the processing power with which we meet them. With the same facts, one can start a successful business and another can miss the opportunity. The story goes that a company sent two salesmen to Africa to sell shoes. One salesman wrote back his report saying, it is impossible to sell shoes here because no one wears any. The other wrote, there is a huge market for shoes here. No one has any. The crucial thing is to develop clarity of thinking.

With clarity one becomes productive at work: Work reduces and output increases. Some people have earned with one idea what others don't earn in their lifetimes. Others struggle through to make ends meet.

We may fall a prey to fraudsters. There are always red flags, pointers indicating something's amiss.

Without clarity, we miss them. Our gullibility comes from our credulity. Clarity also creates harmony in relationships. In fact, many quarrels result from fuzzy thinking. We don't know which battles to choose and we are going in to war on every petty issue.

Unfortunately, instead of developing clarity we seek more and more information. The information overload only leads to confusion and we have all become intellectual centipedes.

Having a clear and strong intellect helps one in every facet of life. It is the one tool we simply cannot do without. Many things can be delegated, but thinking we all have to do for ourselves.

Learning to think is a long journey. Thinking correctly and understanding well comes from reflection. The more we reflect on the information, the more can we convert it to comprehension and hence benefit from that knowledge. A computer never becomes wise with knowledge. It merely memorises. A human is expected to become wise and sensible and mature with knowledge. This transition takes place by reflecting, cogitating, considering the information. To take in knowledge without reflecting is akin to eating without digesting. That food will not help. It will hinder — instead of giving nutrition it will give disease.

Through good arguments, we reach sensible conclusions. But to reason well, one needs to watch out for pitfalls in thinking. Not understanding that thinking is an art we believe we can think cogently and clearly without putting in any effort or time in cultivating the ability. To learn cricket one needs time and effort, to learn the guitar one needs time and effort, then why not to learn thinking. It is a skill just like any other. Here are a few basic pointers to help you have more clarity of thought:

STICKING TO THE POINT: In the first and foremost sign of a clear thinker is the ability to stick to the point. What most people refer to as thinking or discussing is simply mental wandering. Starting at any random point one kicks the conversational football helter-skelter, never hitting any goal. No issue is resolved. No point is made. Listen in to conversations. Starting at say, politics, it moves seamlessly to cooking, to sports to gossip. Before one issue is resolved, they move onto something else. From that new point, something else grabs their attention and they dart on after it. They abandon that in turn for yet another attraction. At the end, they have learnt nothing. You may recognise marital quarrels in this one. Starting with expressing irritation at a spouse's late coming, it moves quickly to their parents, to personal hygiene to education, to money making abilities, and of course, the issue of the lateness was never resolved, so it crops up again and that sets off the whole loop yet again. To avoid this, a good practice is to always think in terms of a question and not move from it until it has been resolved.

COLOURATION: Coloured terms are those terms, which not only tell the quality of something, but also colour it with the opinions and biases of the speaker or writer. When a mother speaks of her daughter, she says her daughter is very consistent. Speaking of the same girl, the mother-in-law says she is stubborn. Both are referring to the girl's quality of

sticking to things. But one makes it sound good, the other bad. This is a quality of language. Using this quality, spindoctors can make anything sound good or bad. Referring to someone as Pappu makes him look bad without ever giving any reason to support that argument. Call a man a terrorist and everyone is against him. Call him a freedom fighter and suddenly, he is glorified. In each of these examples, it is the same quality being referred to but with different colourations. When we come across coloured terms, we should put in parenthesis opposite colourations to keep the argument objective. Often, what seems like an argument is only the use of coloured terms.

BEGGING THE QUESTION: This means answering the question by merely repeating the question in different words. There is no answer, only the question rephrased. A person may ask, 'Why does this drug cause sleepiness?' The response comes, 'It has soporific qualities.' Soporific means sleep inducing. Thus, it causes sleepiness because it causes sleepiness.

SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE: Many bitter arguments take place when people do not speak the same language. Speaking the same language means using the same word in the same sense. When one speaks English and another speaks Spanish, they both do not jump to conclusions about what the other means. They understand they are using different languages. But when both use the same language it is less clear. Take the word homely. In British English, it refers to a person with good home-making qualities. In American English, it means a boring wallflower. Think of words such as religion, left-wing, right-wing, equal opportunities, liberal. What do they mean to you? Take a random check with people around. What does it mean to them? With differences in the meanings of the word itself, no fruitful discussion is possible. So, before launching on any argument it is useful to define the terms one is using and agree on that definition.

VERIFICATION OF FACTS: Arguments are on certain grounds. It starts from a certain 'fact'. One of the simplest things to do in today's world of easy access to information is to verify the facts. Is the very base of the argument correct? Sometimes, one might find the argument simply dissolve.

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