

Editorial

Art and Science of Asking: A Mental Alchemy

Alchemists were the philosopher-scientists of the bygone era whose inexorable aspiration was the creation of the fabled 'Philosopher's Stone'; which has the power to transmute the base metals like lead and copper into the noble metals like silver and gold. Mystic of the past often advocated a similar 'mental alchemy' from the part of their disciples to transmute their base nature to divine nature. Jesus of Nazareth, the spiritual alchemist par excellence, has taught his disciples a flawless technique to achieve that goal, which is surprisingly too simple: ASK! 'Asking' is both an art and a science. However, just like 'breathing'; 'asking' too is an undeveloped art and science. By incorporating *Pranayama* as the fourth step of his *Ashtangayoga*, Pathanjali elevated our ordinary, habitual 'breathing' into an art and a science (my homage to our ancient *Maharishis*, who had the vision and wisdom to elevate mere human chores into great science and art forms. For example, Through *Kamasutra*, Vatsyayana elevated the instinct-driven [natural] sex into a divine [supernatural] science and art form [*Tantrayoga*] capable of leading its practitioners to God/Self-realization). Even though *Pranayama* as an art and science was known and available to humanity for the past few millennia, most human beings still continue their instinctive, involuntary, artless, unscientific shallow breathing! In the same way, though Jesus has flawlessly instructed his disciples the powerful 'art and science of asking' still people go on 'asking' in their habitual, shallow, artless, unscientific way without much consequence!

Asking for what we need is probably the most underutilized tool we are in possession of. Though the 'art and science of asking' was discovered, perfected, proposed and promulgated by Jesus more than two thousand years ago, we are yet to master it and employ it to our advantage. Good things happen to those who ask. Amazing requests were granted to

people simply because they dared to ask for it. Whether it is money, information, support, assistance, or time, most people are afraid to ask for what they need. Sometimes pride prevents people from exposing themselves as needy, greedy, ignorant, or helpless. However, often it is the fear of rejection that holds people back from asking for what they want. Even though they are scared of hearing the word 'no', they say it to themselves by refusing to ask for help. As Scott Adams, the creator of the Dilbert comic strip affirms in his book, *The Dilbert Future*, rejection is just an illusory concept. According to him there is no such thing as rejection. By hearing 'no' we are in fact getting better than we were before we asked. We did not have what we asked for before we asked and we still do not, so we have not lost anything. However, by asking at least we overcame our fear and smugness. Moreover, a rejection does not prevent us from pursuing our goal. Only we can hold ourselves back. When we recognize that rejection is merely an illusion, we will feel more confident to ask for what we need. What we lack is proper training in the art and science of asking.

Jesus Teaches How to Ask

There are numerous passages in the Gospels where we find Jesus teaching his disciples the art and science of asking. Matthew 7: 7-12 is a typical example where Jesus instructs, "*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened....*" To give greater clarity to his teaching Jesus made use of different parables illustrating the skilful practice of the art and science of asking. The parable of the 'Persistent Widow' that we find in Luke 18: 1-8 explicitly indicates that Jesus told that story to teach his disciples how they should pray. The parable of the 'Friend in Need' (Lk 11:5-10) was also meant to drive home the same message. St Paul reiterates this very same concept in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. St James specifies two reasons for our deficiencies: either we did not ask or did not ask the way we should (James 4:3).

Let us examine what are the essential elements of asking according to Jesus, which will guarantee the attainment of what is asked for. The most important factor is, "*whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours*" (Mk 11:24) A hesitant asking, without expecting to receive what we ask for, is a clear indication of the absence of trust and confidence. We should ask with a positive expectation. Ask as if we anticipate 'yes.' We need a confident boldness that persists in pursuing our goal (Heb 4:16). Secondly, when we ask we should assume that we can receive it. If we ask with the assumption that we cannot get it; our vacillation and self-doubt will drain out the energy of our

asking. Assume we are fit to have what we ask for. We should never presume against ourselves. Another important aspect we should keep in mind is that when we ask, we should ask the one who is capable of giving us what we are asking for. Jesus reminds us, "If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Mt 7:11). A third requirement is recognizing the person whom we ask. Asking the wrong person will not yield fruits. A fourth requisite of proper asking is scientific precision. What we ask should be precise, specific and unambiguous. Most people are not definitively clear what, when, why, and how much they want. They go around wanting more of something, but not being specific enough to obtain it.

The fifth essential trait of the art of asking is repetition. We need to ask repeatedly. One of the most important Success Principles is commitment not to give up. When we ask for help from people we should anticipate occasional refusal and rejection. Some may have other priorities, commitments and reasons for refusing. However, initial rejection need not be taken as permanent. We should get used to the fact that there will be a lot of short-term rejections along the way to the final 'Yes'. The key to the eventual success is not giving up. When someone says 'no' we tend to give-up or look for other options. However, if we persist and keep asking, even the same person might say 'yes' on a different day, in a better mood, when we have new information to offer, or when we prove our commitment, or when circumstances change, or when we change our approach, or when we have established better rapport, or when we build up trust, or when we have paid our dues, or when the economy is better, and so on. 'No', is an invitation to wait and work for the arrival of the final letter 'w' that will make it 'now'. Jesus often advised his disciples to be like children (Mt 18:3). Children are experts in this Success Principle. They will ask the same person over and over again without any hesitation until they get what they want. Evolving a new perspective of rejection and learning how to ask will hasten the realization of our goals. If we practice asking as Jesus taught us, soon we will get very good at it. Asking accelerates our progress by getting what we need, or enkindling our spirit to work for it. Make a list of what we need to ask for in all areas of our life, and start asking. Remember, anything is possible if we dare to ask. Brazil's Paulo Coelho, in his masterpiece novel, *The Alchemist* states, "When you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it."

Changing Mindset through Affirmation

Scott Adams, in his book, *The Dilbert Future*, explains how he managed to create his Worldwide Empire through writing down his needs

in an affirmative form 15 times daily. He claims that as if by magic coincidences began building up until he achieved his objective against all odds. In his book he avows that the writing of the affirmation "I Scott Adams will become a syndicated cartoonist" 15 times daily propelled and energized him to achieve that goal. Richard Wiseman in his book, *The Luck Factor*, indicates that people who expect luck have a more powerful ability to notice opportunities in their environment. It is observed that optimistic people's field of perception is greater than that of others. He also discovered that when people are trained to expect luck, their field of perception increases accordingly. Part of the mystery of affirmations has to do with the fact that it improves our ability to notice an opportunity. The seemingly miraculous results with affirmations could be traced back to noticing the opportunities. Optimism motivates a person to pursue and persist in the effort of writing affirmations, and writing affirmations on the other hand invigorates one's optimism. Either way people who keep writing affirmations would more readily notice opportunities than the average non-optimist.

Writing affirmations is an effective way to bridle our rational mind that is often sceptical about the possibility of realizing our set goals. Through writing affirmations we can pass on our desires to our subconscious mind which does not scrutinize its rationality and practicality. If we continue to write a goal 15 times a day for months, there is a good chance that some part of our brain will start thinking that goal as achievable even if our rational mind does not see how. Writing affirmations also helps us to focus on our goal, moving them from wishful thinking to something in which we are willing to invest ourselves. Affirmations are a way to manage our own level of commitment. In effect, we are hypnotizing ourselves, and this might help us to endure the tough terrains that are normal while pursuing ambitious goals. We would work hard only if we fully expect something good to come out of it. Affirmations could be regarded as a link in the long chain of cause and effect.

Affirmations are a powerful tool that can help shift our mind-set to one of greater abundance and joy. To make affirmations effective; together with constant repetition we should also make use of strong and positive emotions. Affirmations work directly on our subconscious mind and help to change our old, deep-seated beliefs. Our beliefs are nothing but thoughts we have repeated to ourselves over and over again, until they became 'truths' for us. Consequently, it may take some time to change those old limiting beliefs to something stimulating. For example, let us say we begin reciting the affirmation, "I attract people easily." If we have spent much of our lifetime focused on rejection and loneliness, our

subconscious mind will resist this new thought because it feels like a lie. Our subconscious mind is constantly repeating the beliefs, “I am a disaster. I am not good enough. Nobody cares for me. Life is a burden for me. Failure is my destiny.” and so on. This may be the reality we see as we look at our present life. But it is important to understand that our present circumstances are the direct result of our present beliefs. Whether these beliefs were given to us by other people or whether we gathered them ourselves, we will need to overwrite those embedded beliefs with new ones. For doing that needs time and effort.

The good news is that if we keep repeating thoughts like, “I attract people easily. I always have enough and more friends. Wherever I go I find friends,” and so on, our subconscious mind will begin to believe them, and our attitude and appearance will begin to shift in support of our new beliefs. Even more importantly, stimulating the process with strong, positive emotion will give our affirmations that much more power. For example, reciting the words, “I always have intimate friends who stand by me when am in need” while also feeling happy and peaceful inside delivers the “truth” of this statement directly to our subconscious mind. Our subconscious mind cannot tell the difference between something we imagine and something we are really experiencing. When we feel strong emotion and think repetitive thoughts, our subconscious mind absorbs the messages. Ironically, this is exactly how beliefs of isolation and rejection are also formed and perpetuated! We think thoughts like these: “I am not attractive. Nobody cares for me. People leave me as soon as they come to know me...” - and simultaneously we emit stacks of negative emotions and attitudes. Consequently, our subconscious mind says, “This must be true.” A matter of hope is that we can consciously control what we think and feel. As Eleanor Roosevelt has rightly said, “A stumbling block to the pessimist is a stepping-stone to the optimist.” We may be in the habit of thinking and feeling negatively, but we can change it at any time!

Watch and Change Our World

One of the most surprising discoveries of quantum physics, which has fascinated both scientists and philosophers, states that the observer, by the very act of watching, affects the observed reality. The researchers at the Weizmann Institute of Science conducted a highly controlled experiment to observe how a beam of electrons is affected by the act of being observed. *Nature*, The International weekly journal of science, in its February 26 issue (Vol. 391, pp. 871-874) reported the findings of this study. The experiment revealed that the greater the amount of “watching,” the greater the observer’s influence on what actually takes

place. In other words, the observer influences/affects the performance of the observed. Through mere observation we can bring about change in what we observe. In other words, we (nobody else) are responsible if things/persons remain the way they are because it is we who failed to observe them. Likewise it is the lack of self-observation that hampers our transformation and further evolution. Sri Ramana Maharishi proposed to his disciples who sought enlightenment to ponder the key question "Who am I?" This instruction resonates with the maxim "*Gnothi seauton*" (Know thyself) inscribed in the vestibule of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi for those who came there seeking wisdom.

Wise men of every age offered similar advices to their disciples indicating that the realization of our true potential depends on our conscious self-observation. These dictums are true and valuable even today as they were in the past. Part of knowing ourselves consists in understanding our beliefs. The problem with most of our beliefs is that they remain subconscious. We received and stockpiled them without ever having them critically examined or validated. Psychologists alert us that most of the stockpiling takes place before we reach the age of five and some we could even trace back to our mother's womb. The Law of Attraction states that we draw to ourselves those experiences that match our conscious and subconscious beliefs. Those beliefs and experiences eventually determine and colour our vision of reality. What if those beliefs are in opposition to what we are actually trying to accomplish? What if they no longer serve our purpose? Is it possible to rewrite our destiny through altering those debilitating and limiting beliefs? The answer is yes.

Exploring Debilitating Beliefs

Just as there are certain habitual beliefs among the successful, there are certain deep-rooted beliefs among those who regularly fail. Through the observation of those self-defeating beliefs it is possible for us to be in charge of our destiny. Patric Chan, the author of *Simple Success Principles* enumerates some of those debilitating beliefs prevalent among losers. The foremost belief rampant among losers is that they are not worthy/good enough to associate with the successful and opt for the company of losers. Such birds of the same feather believe and have an extraordinary knack to convince each other that nothing is going to work. Losers show great zeal to recruit new members into their conglomerate. They are very comfortable in their shoes because they are fully convinced that they cannot afford anything better. They are distrustful of change. Another typical belief of losers is that the moment they step-in; misfortune strikes and things take a wrong turn.

They are absolutely convinced that bad luck follows them wherever they go and do not know why. Nido R. Qubein in his book *Seven Choices for Success and Significance* says that often people exhibit an inclination to live by a 'to-do' list rather than by a 'to-be' list. For example: to be more generous, more patient, more learned, and more reasonable. One can check things quickly off a 'to-do' list, while it may take several months to cross something off the 'to-be' list. We cannot have a 'to-be' list without having a 'stop doing' list. To become something, we must stop being something else, by acting on an item from our 'stop doing' list. Being specific about the goal is indispensable to draw an itinerary. Since losers do not set goals and walk towards them; things remain always the same. As Pope Francis recently said, "No wind is favourable to he who does not know where he is going".

Discerning and Amending Unconscious Beliefs

Various techniques are proposed to explore and identify our unconscious beliefs. Meditation and psychological tests are effective ways to tap into our inner disposition and constitution. If we can decipher our deeply implanted beliefs; it is possible for us to decode and predict our responses accurately. There are certain shortcuts that will help us to explore, rectify and streamline our unconscious beliefs so that we could surpass our limits and limitations to realize our true potential. If we experience on a daily basis a recurring problem in certain area of our life then probably there resides a false or limiting belief. This does not mean that all difficulties we encounter in relationships and jobs are caused by false beliefs. However, if the problem constantly resurfaces, then we can be almost certain that a false belief is involved. In such situations our immediate tendency is to point our finger at somebody or something else as its cause. If we withhold that temptation to blame someone or something for the uneasiness we experience and look for the validity of our beliefs; quite often we will be in a position to identify the fallacy of our belief. We might have gulped down certain false beliefs from our parents, teachers, friends, TV, situations etc. What is important here is not the source or the cause of our false belief but our readiness to amend it, so that we may not get upset on account of it any more. This demands constant self-observation. Keeping erroneous beliefs are the cause of many of our problems, limits and limitations. To keep hold of anything that prevents us from opening our eyes, ears, mind and heart to reality and truth adversely affects our mental alchemy. As Carl Jung reminds us, "Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."

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