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Teaching in ancient India

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50. Teaching in ancient India

WHO is the genuine *Guru* (preceptor)? He who teaches by precept and example, good conduct, right thinking, loyalty to Truth, mental discipline and sense of duty. Who is the genuine student? He who learns these. These are the qualities that will guarantee happiness here and bliss hereafter. These virtues will effectively countermand the evils that degrade man into a monster.

The educational system that brings both teacher and student together, has two aspects' first, the provision of skills and information so that man can live in health and happiness and the second, the understanding of one's inner urges and their sublimation in order to attain lasting peace, equanimity and bliss. The two aspects are not opposed; they are bound irrevocably together. Both teachers and students have to recognise this truth.

Man is not a machine, contrived by a clever combination of legs and hands, head and heart, mind and matter. In these and over these, there is an immanent yet transcendent entity which is called the *Aathma* (the Overself or divine). The physical eye cannot see It; the other senses too cannot comprehend it; It is beyond the realm of the "Seen." All that is sensed, all that is comprehensible by the five senses, is "the Universe," the *Jagath* (evermoving, everchanging Cosmos). The 'seen' exists on the basis of the 'unseen;' 'the tree' is seen but the root that sustains it and bears it, is invisible. The bungalow is seen; the foundation structure on which it stands is beyond sight. The self and the Cosmos created by the Self are both having the *Aathma* as their sustenance and support. This was the great lesson that was imparted to every generation by the elders in this country since ages.

Valuable contribution of ancient Universities

Three or four centuries ago, before the West secured a foot-hold in India, there were only a few Universities; they had no huge campuses and buildings; the home of the learned scholar was itself the college. He had four or five pupils only. There was no time-table for the classes. It all depended on the compassion of the teacher and the yearning of the pupil. He might instruct him in the silent hours of the night or during the day, under a spreading tree or in the temple corridor. Men and women who came to the temple or who walked through the grove might listen awhile and learn a thing or two.

Besides giving instruction on basic subjects, each f University attracted to itself and maintained a number of specialists in one special branch of study. The favourite subject, on which the University at Kaashi paid special attention to was Grammar; the University of Kashmir had specialists in Rhetoric and of Thakshashila (modern Taxila) in Medicine (*Aayur-Vedha*), the knowledge relating to healthy and happy living. The Navadweep University chose to pursue (Logic of truth) more than other subjects of study. Amaraavathi, the capital city, where Bharatha, the brother of Raama ruled long ago, had a University where also the system of Medicine propounded by Charaka and Sushrutha was taught for generations by expert teacher practioners.

Rise to Divinity was the main aim of pupils

Of course, these Universities were not mere purveyors of learning. They inspired their *alumni* to lead simple spiritual lives, speak soft and sweet, and cultivate compassion, reverence and equanimity. The rise to Divinity was the only aim of the pupil; to elevate him to the level they themselves had reached was the only purpose the teachers had before them. Universities and other educational centres were in those days beyond the hold of the rulers. They honoured and

loved the ideals and aspirations of lovers of knowledge and persons who had dedicated themselves to the cause.

Among the primary and secondary schools, the colleges and centres of higher learning, most attention was paid by society and its leaders to primary education. Their endeavour was to plant pure, ennobling and strengthening thoughts and beliefs in the tender minds of children. The educationists of those days paid attention to problems, like who are the most equipped and the most efficient to teach; which are the subjects which must be taught and when and where are they to be taught and to whom. They tried to adjust the curricula and the syllabi in accordance with the needs, aspirations and attainments of the learners. For, there was no room then in the learning teaching process for compulsion or force.

Bhaarath welcomes and respects all faiths

Since the classes had only six, seven or ten pupils, the teacher could discover whether the pupil had assimilated the subject and clarify immediately any doubt that disturbed his understanding. The teachers had an overwhelming sense of duty; the pupil had an equally overwhelming yearning to learn. So, instruction on topics useful for happy living and for discovering the spring of wisdom, power and bliss, that lay in one's inner core, were both available to the pupil.

Most of the learning was by listening to the preceptor. Not only in the seats of higher learning, but even the smith, the artisan, the artist, the carpenter, the farmer, the potter, the writer, the musician, the sculptor---all learnt from the elders by the silent process of lovingly listening and reverentially watching; not through the process of poring over books.

Those days can be revived, if only you love and revere the heritage which is yours. Bhaarath is a garden of multicoloured flowers---the flowers of the spirit known as *Sanaathana Dharma* (Eternal Universal Religion), Bhuddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam. The truths they practise, the hymns they sing, the prayers they voice forth, are filling the atmosphere here with Divine fragrance. Bhaarath has, throughout the ages, welcomed and respected all faiths, with equal ardour.

In spite of this, the wrong impression that people here worship hundreds of gods in place of the One, is spread by ignorant persons. God is One; people call on Him in several languages---this discovery was made in India millennia ago. This was the first country in the world to proclaim it. Of course, the various qualities of this one God---His compassion, His wisdom, His inexhaustible riches, His inscrutability, His might---have been given names and forms, but each worshipper of these is aware that they are only phases of the One Indivisible Eternal Absolute. Each trade, each profession, has a guardian deity, a facet of the Guardian of the Cosmos.

Teachers were after spiritual treasures

People here are aware of God in everything---the truck driver folds his palms before the steering wheel and utters a prayer, the potter bows his head before the wheel, the poet worships the pen, the musician invokes the deity in the harmonium before he starts playing on it. No one enters upon a task without prayer and making a sign of submission. This means that the spiritual attitude precedes the secular attitude of self-praise.

The inner meaning of the Indian attitude is beyond the experience of people of other cultures. They ridicule Indians adoring trees and stones, birds and beasts, mountains and rivers, believing them to be gods. But, the Hindhu adores the God whom he believes is manifest in the stone and

not the stone itself as wholly and fully God. *Ishaavaasyam Idham Sarvam*, the *Upanishaths* declare to man. "All this is God"---even the bird, the beast, the snake, the eagle, the peepul trees, the *thulsi* (basic) plant. The Omnipresence of God implies the Oneness of God.

The ancient Universities emphasised this Immanence and Transcendence of God. Teachers did not calculate and clamour for wages. Their needs were fulfilled by society. They never worried about material comfort or discomfort. They were after spiritual treasures. Pupils too insisted that they should be shown the way to liberation from the shackles of material desires. Teachers were more affectionate towards their pupils than to their own children. They were renunciants, willing and eager to undergo trials and tribulations, ever contented, happy and joyful.

He who is content is the richest

The pupils too were not learning with cushy jobs in view. They sought each subject of study as a step towards self-realisation. They valued the instruction, for it purified the mind and clarified the intellect and sanctified the vision. They had before them the ideal of becoming useful for their parents, the society which fostered them, the country which hoped for the best out of them and mankind to which they belong. He who is the slave of desires is the poorest; he who is content, is the richest.

So cultivate the traits that students of past ages sought to cultivate. Become useful to your parents. Do not belittle them as illiterate or ignorant. They are far more knowledgeable than you. Do not cause tears to fill their eyes. Love them, revere them, serve them. Be humble and loving, wherever you are, in whatever company. Remember the Names of the Lord, indicating His Glory, His Mercy, His Love. Then, all egoistic feelings will flee from you.

Life is a game of football. You are the ball, and you are bound to be thrown and kicked about, this side and that. How long have you to bear this treatment? Until the air is full in the ball; deflate it, no one will kick it again. The air that inflates it is the Ego! When the Ego is out, Bliss comes in. When you are students, study without participating in other adventures like politics. They will only increase tension and anxiety and harm your studies. Let discipline, devotion and duty be subjects in your compulsory curriculum. Master these and you will win glory.

Sri Sathya Sai College, Brindhaavan, 10- 7-1980

Man has to become Divine, the Divine from which he has come. So, he has to lessen his attachment to the world, not by' cutting himself off, but, by being in it as an instrument in His hands; by subduing all tendencies towards egoism that raise their heads in him; by single-minded attention to the dictates of God called Dharma (Righteousness).

Edison the scientist concentrated so much on the solution of the problems that worried him that he left untouched/or days together the food and drink that was pushed in through the doors of his laboratory. You must have the same concentration and shraddha (steady dedication) while engaged in saadhana (spiritual discipline).

Sri Sathya Sai