

Methods of Education in Vedanta (II)

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At the end of the *Sikshāvalli* there is a passage where the *āchārya* is found giving a Convocation Address, so to say, to his students who have completed their education. He advises his students thus: ‘*Mātridevo bhava*’ (Treat your mother as God), ‘*Pitrivevo bhava*’ (Treat your father as God), ‘*Ācāryadevo bhava*’ (Treat your teacher as God), ‘*Atithidevo bhava*’ (Treat your guest as God). Then he says, ‘*Satyam vada*’ (Speak the Truth); ‘*Dharmam cara*’ (Do that which is right following the scriptures). ‘*Svādhyāyānmā pramadah*’ (Never deviate from learning). This long list of advice stresses again and again that even if you have children and grandchildren, never give up your studies. It also tells the students—‘*Shraddhayā deyam*’; ‘*Shriyā deyam*’; ‘*Hriyā deyam*’, ‘*Bhīyā deyam*’ and so on. That is, if you give somebody something, give with due respect, give according to your capacity, give with humility and fear or reverence, and of course with love. So that is a beautiful passage which gives the best conclusion of the preparatory education.

Higher education

Now we come to higher education, the aim of which is, as already I told you, wisdom and perfection. There are various methods in Vedanta to attain this wisdom. First, there is evaluation. Evaluation is to find out what method will suit the student. So the best method we find in the *Bhṛiguvalli* of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. There the emphasis is on the student. As the question and answer is an absolutely

essential part of that education, the student (Bhrigu) goes to his father (Varuna) who is a knower of Brahman and asks him, ‘*Adhihi bhagavo brahmeti*’—‘Teach me Brahman, O revered sir.’ Bhrigu’s request shows that he already has got an idea due to his inward mind that there is one common Reality throughout the universe. But what is the nature of that Reality? The father then gives him what we call in modern language data—‘*Annam prānam cakshuh shrotram mano vācamiti*’—‘Food, vital force, eye, ear, mind and speech’ are the aids to the Knowledge of Brahman. Thus he gives his son certain things to think of. And then he says, ‘*Yato vā imāni bhūtāni jāyante; Yena jātāni jivanti; Yat prayantya bhisamvishanti; Tadvijijnāsasva; Tad brahmeti; Sa tapo tapyata; Sa tapastaptvā.*’ That is, that which is the source of everything, sustains everything and into which everything finally dissolves is Brahman. A special feature of Indian thought is that it is God who destroys the universe. But in Semitic religions, some devil comes to destroy it. So the devil appears to be superior to God. In Indian philosophy, however, we are never afraid of destruction because what is destruction after all? This Upanishadic statement is that, at the end, everything goes back to Brahman, the source. This much the teacher has given—some data and a definition. Now you think. Varuna does not actually tell his son Bhrigu that ‘you think’. He said, ‘You try to know That.’

What Bhrigu did? He concentrated his mind. ‘*Sa tapastaptvā*’—‘Having performed austerities’, he came to understand first of all

that from food we emerge and food sustains us and finally we go back to matter. So he thought, maybe *anna* is the ultimate Reality. But *anna* is changing every moment. So it cannot be the ultimate truth, it cannot be the real source of the world. Is it then *prāna*, the vital energy in our body? No, it also has defects. Then, could it be the mind by which we think? No, for it has defects. Then it may be the 'I'-consciousness. But that also is not complete. What It is then? Bhrigu calls it the universal joy—*Ānanda*—'*Ānando brahmeti vyajānāt*'—bliss is Brahman. So this is the best method of education.

I, as a student, met a mathematics teacher. He used to write one step, leave some space, and then write another step, indicating very clearly that he has not written the second step. And writing that, he used to look at the faces of all children one by one. Some faces used to shine because they were able to think out the second step. But, the teacher also observed that some faces were not shining. So he would immediately write the second step. By the time we would write down, he had already rubbed out the first and third step. He never allowed us to write down the sum. Then he would write the fourth step. So this is what is called the 'Dalton Plan'.

Here in the Upanishad also, Varuna, the teacher, gave Bhrigu some definition, some data so that he himself could work and proceed to realize the truth. Bhrigu could ultimately realize the Truth because his father had not given the complete answer. He thought his father had asked him to think. This is how the whole process of attaining wisdom starts. This is the best method of education in which the student is honoured. Shankarāchārya, while discussing the *Katha Upanishad*, says: I bow down to Yama, the great teacher, I bow down to Nachiketā, the great student. So the learner is the main basis on which education stands.

The story of Āruni and Shvetaketu

Even in the *Chāndogya Upanishad* there is a story of Āruni and Shvetaketu. Āruni was a great sage. One day Āruni called his son Shvetaketu and said: Your relatives are all brahmins while you are not as yet. None in our family should be left like that. Why don't you go out and get educated? Then Shvetaketu, who was twelve years old, went out and studied all the Vedas in a *Gurukula* for twelve years. When he came at the age of twenty-four, Āruni found his son to be very haughty and vain as if he knew everything. Āruni wondered, how education could produce such a result! Then he asked Shvetaketu: My son, did you ask your teacher the question 'by knowing which even the unknown things become known?' He said, my father, how can there be a thing by knowing which unknown things become known?

Āruni then said, if you know the nature of clay you know everything made of clay. If you know the nature of gold you know everything made of gold. If you know one thing made of iron you know everything made of iron. All things are nothing but empty sound—just names. The only reality is the substance. But you did not ask about it!

So here again you find that the student is the centre. He has to ask and acquire that knowledge.

In the field of higher education Vedanta always puts the student at the centre and follows the method of question and answer. Moreover, in the Vedantic prayer '*saha nāvavatu*' etc, the teacher identifies himself with the student, and together they pray for strength. Then the prayer says, '*mā vidvishāvahai*'—'May we never be jealous of each other.' So the great lesson here is that *love* is the main method of communication. Through love only and not attachment that the teacher

can communicate with the students.

Now, what to do with the average students who are not Bhrigus. Again we have to turn to the *Chāndogya Upanishad* to get the answer. I already told you a little about Āruni and Shvetaketu. There Shvetaketu said: Please father, you teach me now, and do not send me to some university.

He said this because by now he knew the worth of his father who himself was a knower of Brahman. Āruni then went on teaching his son beautifully through demonstration and experiment. First, he gives his son an idea that it is food which makes the mind. Shvetaketu said he was unable to understand how food could become the mind. Āruni then said: 'Don't eat food for fourteen days. Drink water as much as you can for life can be kept on water. And then come to me on the fifteenth day. Shvetaketu followed the instruction because he was keen on learning the Truth.

When he came on the fifteenth day Āruni asked him something about the Veda and he replied that he didn't remember anything. Then Āruni said: My child, eat some food and then come back to me. So he ate some food and came back to his father. Then the father said: Now tell me what is in the Vedas. Then Shvetaketu went on reciting everything. Then Āruni said: Your mind lost its vigour because you did not eat food. Now I have proved to you that food makes the mind.

So this sort of experimentation and demonstration were adopted as methods of imparting Vedantic education in India in ancient times. That is one method.

Let us go to the fourth and fifth section (Chapter four) of the *Chāndogya Upanishad*. There we find the story of Satyakāma Jābāla, who had gone to Haridrumata Gautama to live with him as a celibate disciple. The teacher accepted Satyakāma because he was truthful and gave him four hundred cattle—thin and weak—

and said, 'you follow them' and serve them well. Now, as Satyakāma was proceeding to the forest, he thought that he will come back to the Guru only when the cattle will become one thousand in number. He himself set the goal. But when he went to the forest he had forgotten his target. He simply served the cows to the best of his ability for many years. Then, the story tells us, one bull told him one day, 'O Satyakāma, we have become one thousand. Now take us back to the house of the teacher.' The bull also said, 'I wish to tell you of one foot of Brahman. The eastern side is one part, the western side is one part, the southern side is one part and the northern side is one part. Consisting of four parts, this is one foot of Brahman.' Then he said, 'Agni (Fire) will tell you more.'

So next day, while returning along with the herds of cattle, he stopped at a place in the evening and worshipped the fire. After that, pleased with Satyakāma, fire said, 'I like to tell you about one foot of Brahman. Earth is one part, intermediate space (*antariksha*) is one part, heaven is one part and ocean is one part.' Then fire added: 'The swan will tell you of one foot.' Next the swan came flying and said to him: 'I wish to tell you of one foot of Brahman. Fire is one part, the sun is one part, the moon is one part, lightning is one part,' and added, 'The diver-bird (*Madguh*) will tell you about one foot.'

Similarly, *Madguh* said to Satyakāma: '*Prānah* is one part, the eye is one part, the ear is one part, and the mind is one part.'

Having been taught thus, Satyakāma came back to his Guru's house. The Guru said, 'Your face is shining like a man of knowledge, a knower of Brahman. Who has taught you?' He said: Beings other than man have taught me. But I have heard that unless you learn from a Guru your knowledge is not complete. So please tell me again.

Then the story goes on to say that his

Guru taught him the same things which other beings had already taught him. Nothing was left out. So this is another method of imparting education. For a particular boy this was the method of education. He was asked to serve the cattle. And Satyakāma's whole-hearted service along with the *upāsana* that he was doing gave him full knowledge. Thus various methods have been prescribed in Vedanta for various students.

Let us now turn to the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad*. There we find one teacher called Yājñavalkya who had three different students in different situations and at different places. When he wanted to become a sannyasin he had two wives. The eldest wife, Maitreyi, was keen on learning about God. The other one was named Kātyāyani. She was like an average woman. So Yājñavalkya tells Maitreyi that he wants to take her permission as he wants to leave the house and live the life of a sannyasin. Yājñavalkya says: You two wives were related because of your relation to me. So when I go away you will not be related anymore. Let there be no quarrel. If I divide my property into two and give one half to you, will you be satisfied?

Maitreyi says: What do you say? If you give me the entire world full of wealth, will that make me immortal?

Yājñavalkya replies: No. Wealth can never give you immortality; your life will be only the life of a man of wealth.

Maitreyi then says: What shall I do with the wealth that cannot give me immortality?—*'Yenāham nāmritā syām kimaham tena kuryām'*; *'Yadeva bhagavān veda tadeva me bruhiti'*—*'Kindly give me that instruction which you know will lead me towards immortality'*. Then Yājñavalkya says: You have been always dear to me, now you have become dearer. Sit down and listen attentively so that you can understand what I am going to say.

And then he tells her very differently adopting a very known method. He says: The love between the husband and the wife is not due to the husband and the wife. It is due to the common reality pervading them that the love grows—*'Na vā are patyuh kāmāya patih priyo bhavati; ātmanastu kāmāya patih priyo bhavati.'* So if you love anything and anybody in this world thinking it to be separate from Brahman, you will be defeated. But when you know that every love between two beings is only due to the common reality, then and then only you will get knowledge.

Here I refer to one small incident from Holy Mother's life. At one time two young people used to live with Holy Mother. And they, what you call, were emotionally bosom friends. In emotional friendship, if something unpalatable happens the friendship breaks down. The same thing happened in the case of these two persons. One of them out of vengeance went to Holy Mother and said: 'Mother, don't keep that boy with you.' She said, 'Why are you insulting me?' 'Mother, I am not telling anything to you, but I am telling how bad he is. Of course, you know that.' She said, 'How do you know that he is bad? Because he loved you, you know everything about him; and today by exposing that love you are insulting me! Do you not know, I am the *love* that exists between any two creatures in this world? Don't you know that? And you are insulting that love today!'

This is how Yājñavalkya teaches Maitreyi. Let us look at a different scenario. Once King Janaka had invited all the best scholars in the world and gave them lot of gifts. But he kept a thousand cows whose horns were covered with gold. He said he will give those cows to the best knower of Brahman. Actually he desired to learn about Brahman from their discussion. But when nobody present there ventured to say that 'I am the best', sage Yājñavalkya stood up and

asked one of his disciples to take all the cows to his ashrama. At that point all others got excited and asked the sage, 'Do you think you are the best?' He said, whoever is the best, I bow down to him. But I need these cows. Then they said, 'Yājñavalkya, you cannot do like that.' 'Then ask me questions', said Yājñavalkya. So many started hurling questions. Now, Yājñavalkya replied to their questions in a very different way from the one he had recourse to while replying to Maitreyi. He told them what happens when true knowledge enters a man. First his desires vanish. He becomes childlike and simple, etc, etc. Then Gārgi, a *brahmavādinī*, rose and said: O scholars! I will shoot two arrows. And if he is able to answer my questions you all should bow down to him and go away. Then she asked questions about Brahman. And Yājñavalkya started replying to her questions saying that the knowers of Brahman say (he did not say

'I know Brahman or I do not know') like this and gave nineteen negatives to explain both the transcendent and the immanent aspects of Brahman. He followed a very different approach now that Gārgi could understand.

Now Yājñavalkya went to Janaka's house and not to the assembly. Janaka asked him: Have you come for the cows or for discussion on Brahman? Yājñavalkya said: For both, O King. For cows I could have gone to any other king. But I have come to you because you are keen on learning. There he adopted what we call the 'analytical' process to reveal the nature of Brahman to Janaka.

So the methods of education in Vedanta are many. The teacher has to find out first which method he should follow because capacity of students are different. The method cannot be the same. So the fitness of the student is first found out and, according to that, education is given to him. ■

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attend more to this aspect, for it is no exaggeration to say that we are being regularly drilled into over-secularism. The town has invaded the village. Waves of social disintegration are having full play and the river of Bengali life is becoming a stagnant fen. It is time that our worship became vital, not of the mechanical *nirguna* or *gunātita* type which seeks to clothe religious rites with a vague and indeterminate garb, and makes of it an unreality.

This, of course, is primarily the affair of the more developed among us, with whom worship is an ascent of the spirit, *abhyā-roha* in the language of the Upanishads. The godhead descends, and humanity must ascend to catch it up in life.

The periods of *vyutthāna*, or interruption, are many, and the occasions for *yoga*, or divine communion, are few and far between. If the Durgā *pūjā* furnishes us with the blessed opportunities for such communion, there can be no greater acquisition. The average man looks upon it with the eye of optimism. It is the time when he, rings out the old and rings in the new, and performs a stocktaking of what he has lost and of what he has gained, in the language of the devout poet Rāmprasād; when he stretches forth in all humility with faith within and God overhead, with hope and courage, towards the ballast in 'the tempestuous stream of his daily life; and this is She, our Mother, Durgā. ■

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