

Mental Education

The Mother



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Sri Aurobindo Chair of Integral Studies

Sardar Patel University

Vallabh Vidyanagar

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Note

In these articles I am trying to put into ordinary terms the whole yogic terminology, for these Bulletins are meant more for people who lead an ordinary life, though also for students of yoga—I mean people who are primarily interested in a purely physical material life but who try to attain more perfection in their physical life than is usual in ordinary conditions. It is a very difficult task but it is a kind of yoga. These people call themselves "materialists" and they are apt to get agitated or irritated if yogic terms are used, so one must speak their language avoiding terms likely to shock them. But I have known in my life persons who called themselves "materialists" and yet followed a much severer discipline than those who claim to do yoga. What we want is that humanity should progress; whether it professes to lead a yogic life or not matters little, provided it makes the necessary effort for progress.

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OF ALL lines of education, mental education is the most widely known and practised, yet except in a few rare cases there are gaps which make it something very incomplete and in the end quite insufficient.

Generally speaking, schooling is considered to be all the mental education that is necessary. And when a child has been made to undergo, for a number of years, a methodical training which is more like cramming than true schooling, it is considered that whatever is necessary for his mental development has been done. Nothing of the kind. Even conceding that the training is given with due measure and discrimination and does not permanently damage the brain, it cannot impart to the human mind the faculties it needs to become a good and useful instrument. The schooling that is usually given can, at the most, serve as a system of gymnastics to increase the suppleness of the brain. From this standpoint, each branch of human learning represents a special kind of mental gymnastics, and the verbal formulations given to these various branches each constitute a special and well-defined language.

A true mental education, which will prepare man for a higher life, has five principal phases. Normally these phases follow one after another, but in exceptional individuals they may alternate or even proceed simultaneously. These five phases, in brief, are:

- (1) Development of the power of concentration, the capacity of attention.
- (2) Development of the capacities of expansion, widening, complexity and richness.
- (3) Organisation of one's ideas around a central idea, a higher ideal or a supremely luminous idea that will serve as a guide in life.
- (4) Thought-control, rejection of undesirable thoughts, to become able to think only what one wants and when one wants.
- (5) Development of mental silence, perfect calm and a more and more total receptivity to inspirations coming from the higher regions of the being.

It is not possible to give here all the details concerning the methods to be employed in the application of these five phases of education to different individuals. Still, a few explanations on points of detail can be given.

Undeniably, what most impedes mental progress in children is the constant dispersion of their thoughts. Their thoughts flutter hither and thither like butterflies and they have to make a great effort to fix them. Yet this capacity is latent in them, for when you succeed in arousing their interest, they are capable of a good deal of attention. By his ingenuity, therefore, the educator will gradually help the child to become capable of a sustained effort of attention and a faculty of more and more complete absorption in the work in hand. All methods that can develop this faculty of attention from games to rewards are good and can all be utilised according to the need and the circumstances. But it is the

psychological action that is most important and the sovereign method is to arouse in the child an interest in what you want to teach him, a liking for work, a will to progress. To love to learn is the most precious gift that one can give to a child: to love to learn always and everywhere, so that all circumstances, all happenings in life may be constantly renewed opportunities for learning more and always more.

For that, to attention and concentration should be added observation, precise recording and faithfulness of memory. This faculty of observation can be developed by varied and spontaneous exercises, making use of every opportunity that presents itself to keep the child's thought wakeful, alert and prompt. The growth of the understanding should be stressed much more than that of memory. One knows well only what one has understood. Things learnt by heart, mechanically, fade away little by little and finally disappear; what is understood is never forgotten. Moreover, you must never refuse to explain to a child the how and the why of things. If you cannot do it yourself, you must direct the child to those who are qualified to answer or point out to him some books that deal with the question. In this way you will progressively awaken in the child the taste for true study and the habit of making a persistent effort to know.

This will bring us quite naturally to the second phase of development in which the mind should be widened and enriched.

You will gradually show the child that everything can become an interesting subject for study if it is approached in the right way. The life of every day, of every moment, is the best school of all, varied, complex, full of unexpected experiences, problems to be solved, clear and striking examples and obvious consequences. It is so easy to arouse healthy curiosity in children, if you answer with intelligence and clarity the numerous questions they ask. An interesting reply to one readily brings others in its train and so the attentive child learns without effort much more than he usually does in the classroom. By a choice made with care and insight, you should also teach him to enjoy good reading-matter which is both instructive and attractive. Do not be afraid of anything that awakens and pleases his imagination; imagination develops the creative mental faculty and through it study becomes living and the mind develops in joy.

In order to increase the suppleness and comprehensiveness of his mind, one should see not only that he studies many varied topics, but above all that a single subject is approached in various ways, so that the child understands in a practical manner that there are many ways of facing the same intellectual problem, of considering it and solving it. This will remove all rigidity from his brain and at the same time it will make his thinking richer and more supple and prepare it for a more complex and comprehensive synthesis. In this way also the child will be imbued with the sense of the extreme relativity of mental learning and, little by little, an aspiration for a truer source of knowledge will awaken in him.

Indeed, as the child grows older and progresses in his studies, his mind too ripens and becomes more and more capable of forming general ideas, and with them almost always comes a need for certitude, for a knowledge that is stable enough to form the basis of a mental construction which will permit all the diverse and scattered and often contradictory ideas accumulated in his brain to be organised and put in order. This ordering is indeed very necessary if one is to avoid chaos in one's thoughts. All contradictions can be transformed into complements, but for that one must discover the higher idea that will have the power to bring them harmoniously together. It is always good to consider every problem from all possible standpoints so as to avoid partiality and exclusiveness; but if the thought is to be active and creative, it must, in every case, be the natural and logical synthesis of all the points of view adopted. And if you want to make the totality of your thoughts into a dynamic and constructive force, you must also take great care as to the choice of the central idea of your mental synthesis; for upon that will depend the value of this synthesis. The higher and larger the central idea and the more universal it is, rising above time and space, the more numerous and the more complex will be the ideas, notions and thoughts which it will be able to organise and harmonise.

It goes without saying that this work of organisation cannot be done once and for all. The mind, if it is to keep its vigour and youth, must progress constantly, revise its notions in the light of new knowledge, enlarge its frame-work to include fresh notions and constantly reclassify and reorganise its thoughts, so that each of them may find its true place in relation to the others and the whole remain harmonious and orderly.

All that has just been said concerns the speculative mind, the mind that learns. But learning is only one aspect of mental activity; the other, which is at least equally important, is the constructive faculty, the capacity to form and thus prepare action.

This very important part of mental activity has rarely been the subject of any special study or discipline. Only those who want, for some reason, to exercise a strict control over their mental activities think of observing and disciplining this faculty of formation; and as soon as they try it, they have to face difficulties so great that they appear almost insurmountable.

And yet control over this formative activity of the mind is one of the most important aspects of self-education; one can say that without it no mental mastery is possible. As far as study is concerned, all ideas are acceptable and should be included in the synthesis, whose very function is to become more and more rich and complex; but where action is concerned, it is just the opposite. The ideas that are accepted for translation into action should be strictly controlled and only those that agree with the general trend of the central idea forming the basis of the mental synthesis should be permitted to express themselves in action. This means that every thought entering the mental consciousness should be set before the central idea; if it finds a logical place among the thoughts already grouped, it will be admitted into the synthesis; if not, it will be rejected so that it can have

no influence on the action. This work of mental purification should be done very regularly in order to secure a complete control over one's actions.

For this purpose, it is good to set apart some time every day when one can quietly go over one's thoughts and put one's synthesis in order. Once the habit is acquired, you can maintain control over your thoughts even during work and action, allowing only those which are useful for what you are doing to come to the surface. Particularly, if you have continued to cultivate the power of concentration and attention, only the thoughts that are needed will be allowed to enter the active external consciousness and they then become all the more dynamic and effective. And if, in the intensity of concentration, it becomes necessary not to think at all, all mental vibration can be stilled and an almost total silence secured. In this silence one can gradually open to the higher regions of the mind and learn to record the inspirations that come from there.

But even before reaching this point, silence in itself is supremely useful, because in most people who have a somewhat developed and active mind, the mind is never at rest. During the day, its activity is kept under a certain control, but at night, during the sleep of the body, the control of the waking state is almost completely removed and the mind indulges in activities which are sometimes excessive and often incoherent. This creates a great stress which leads to fatigue and the diminution of the intellectual faculties.

The fact is that like all the other parts of the human being, the mind too needs rest and it will not have this rest unless we know how to provide it. The art of resting one's mind is something to be acquired. Changing one's mental activity is certainly one way of resting; but the greatest possible rest is silence. And as far as the mental faculties are concerned a few minutes passed in the calm of silence are a more effective rest than hours of sleep.

When one has learned to silence the mind at will and to concentrate it in receptive silence, then there will be no problem that cannot be solved, no mental difficulty whose solution cannot be found. When it is agitated, thought becomes confused and impotent; in an attentive tranquillity, the light can manifest itself and open up new horizons to man's capacity.

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