

The Sunlit Path



Sri Aurobindo Chair of Integral Studies

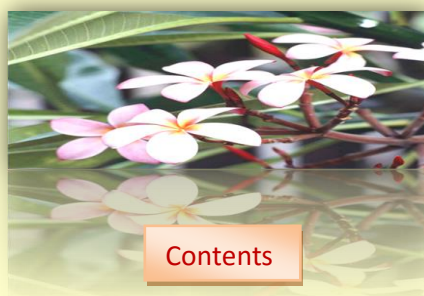
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Editorial

My dear friends,

I am happy to bring to you the 15th July, 2017 issue of The Sunlit Path.

The 'Living Words' present the very core element of metacognition, the thought control. 'Integral Education' contains an essay written by Sri Aurobindo more than a century ago, but it is still relevant today. Our education system has still not evolved to a level of maturity which aligns it with aim of education. 'Integral Life' contains The Mother's comments on 'The Dhammapada'. It beautifully describes the path to happy living.

I do hope you will find the contents inspiring.

Sincere regards,

Dr Bhalendu Vaishnav



Thought Control

The Mother

There are

four movements

which are usually consecutive,

but which in the end may be simultaneous:

to observe one's thoughts is the first,

to watch over one's thoughts is the second,

to control one's thoughts is the third

and

to master one's thoughts is the fourth.

To observe to watch over, to control, to master.

(1)

Intellectual Education

Sri Aurobindo

We now come to the intellectual part of education, which is certainly larger and more difficult, although not more important than physical training and edification of character. The Indian University system has confined itself entirely to this branch and it might have been thought that this limitation & concentration of energy ought to have been attended by special efficiency & thoroughness in the single branch it had chosen. But unfortunately this is not the case.

If the physical training it provides is contemptible and the moral training nil, the mental training is also meagre in quantity and worthless in quality. People commonly say that it is because the services & professions are made the object of education that this state of things exists. This I believe to be a great mistake. **A degree is necessary for service and therefore people try to get a degree. Good! let it remain so. But in order for a student to get a degree let us make it absolutely necessary that he shall have a good education.** If a worthless education is sufficient in order to secure his object & a good education quite unessential, it is obvious that the student will not incur great trouble and diversion of energy in order to acquire what he feels to be unnecessary. But change this state of things, make culture & true science essential and the same interested motive which now makes him content with a bad education will then compel him to strive after culture and true science. **As practical men we must recognise that the pure enthusiasm of knowledge for knowledge's sake operates only on exceptional minds or in exceptional eras.** In civilised countries a general desire for knowledge as a motive for education does exist but it is largely accompanied with the earthier feeling that knowledge is necessary to keep up one's position in society or

to succeed in certain lucrative or respectable pursuits & professions. We in India have become so barbarous that we send our children to school with the grossest utilitarian motives unmixed with any disinterested desire for knowledge; but the education we receive is itself responsible for this. Nobody can cherish disinterested enthusiasm for a bad education; it can only be regarded as a means to some practical end. **But make the education good, thorough & interesting and the love of knowledge will of itself awake in the mind and so mingle with & modify more selfish objects.**

The real source of the evil we complain of is therefore something different; it is a fundamental & deplorable error by which we in this country have confused education with the acquisition of knowledge and interpreted knowledge itself in a singularly narrow & illiberal sense. To give the student knowledge is necessary, but it is still more necessary to build up in him the power of using his knowledge. **It would hardly be a good technical education for a carpenter to be taught how to fell trees so as to provide himself with wood & never to learn how to prepare tables, chairs & cabinets or even what tools were necessary for his craft. Yet this is precisely what our system of education does.**

It trains the memory and provides the student with a store of facts & secondhand ideas. The memory is the woodcutter's axe and the store he acquires is the wood he has cut down in his course of tree felling. When he has done this, the University says to him "We now declare you a Bachelor of Carpentry; we have given you a good & sharp axe and a fair nucleus of wood to begin with. Go on, my son, the world is full of forests and provided the Forest Officer does not object you can cut down trees & provide yourself with wood to your heart's content."

Now the student who goes forth thus equipped, may become a great timber-merchant but unless he is an exceptional genius he will never be even a moderate carpenter. Or to return from the simile to the fact, the

graduate from our colleges may be a good clerk, a decent vakil or a tolerable medical practitioner, but unless he is an especial genius, he will never be a great administrator or a great lawyer or an eminent medical specialist.

These eminences have to be filled up mainly by Europeans. If an Indian wishes to rise to them, he has to travel thousands of miles over the sea in order to breathe an atmosphere of liberal knowledge, original science and sound culture. And even then he seldom succeeds, because his lungs are too debilitated to take in a good long breath of that atmosphere.

The first fundamental mistake has been, therefore, to confine ourselves to the training of the storing faculty memory and the storage of facts and to neglect the training of the three great manipulating faculties, viz. the power of reasoning, the power of comparison and differentiation and the power of expression. These powers are present to a certain extent in all men above the state of the savage and even in a rudimentary state in the savage himself; but they exist especially developed in the higher classes of civilised nations, wherever these higher classes have long centuries of education behind them. But, however highly developed by nature, these powers demand cultivation, they demand that bringing out of natural abilities which is the real essence of education. If not so brought out in youth, they become rusted & stopped with dirt, so that they cease to act except in a feeble, narrow & partial manner. Exceptional genius does indeed assert itself in spite of neglect and discouragement, but even genius self developed does not often achieve as happy results and as free & large a working as the same genius properly equipped & trained.

Amount of knowledge is in itself not of the first importance; but to make the best use of what we know. The easy assumption of our educationists that we have only to supply the mind with a smattering of facts in each department of knowledge & the mind can be trusted to

develop itself and take its own suitable road, is contrary to science, contrary to human experience and contrary to the universal opinion of civilised countries.

Indeed the history of intellectual degeneration in gifted races always begins with the arrest of these three mental powers by the excessive cultivation of mere knowledge at their expense. Much as we have lost as a nation, we have always preserved our intellectual alertness, quickness & originality; but even this last gift is threatened by our University system, & if it goes, it will be the beginning of irretrievable degradation & final extinction.

The very first step in reform must therefore be to revolutionize the whole aims & methods of our education. We must accustom teachers to devote nine-tenths of their energies to the education of the active mental faculties, while the passive retaining faculty, which we call the memory, should occupy a recognised & well-defined but subordinate place, and we must direct our school & university examinations to the testing of these active faculties & not of the memory. For this is an object which cannot be effected by the mere change or rearrangement of the curriculum. It is true that certain subjects are more apt to develop certain faculties than others; the power of accurate reasoning is powerfully assisted by Geometry, Logic & Political Economy; one of the most important results of languages is to refine & train the power of expression, and nothing more enlarges the power of comparison & differentiation than an intelligent study of history. But no particular subject except language is essential, still less exclusively appropriated, to any given faculty.

There are types of intellect, for instance, which are constitutionally incapable of dealing with geometrical problems or even with the formal machinery of Logic, and are yet profound, brilliant & correct reasoners in other intellectual spheres. There is in fact hardly any subject, the sciences

of calculation excepted, which in the hands of a capable teacher, does not give room for the development of all the general faculties of the mind. The first thing needed therefore is the entire and unsparing rejection of the present methods of teaching in favour of those which are now being universally adopted in the more advanced countries of Europe.

But even in the narrower sphere of knowledge acquisition to which our system has confined itself, it has been guilty of other blunders quite as serious. Apart from pure mathematics, which stands on a footing of its own, knowledge may be divided into two great heads, the knowledge of things & the knowledge of men, i.e. to say of human thought, human actions, human nature and human creations as recorded, preserved or pictured in literature, history, philosophy & art. The latter is covered in the term humanities or humane letters, and the idea of a liberal education was formerly confined to these, though it was subsequently widened to include mathematics & has again been widened in modern times to include a modicum of science. The humanities, mathematics & science are therefore the three sisters in the family of knowledge and any self-respecting system of education must in these days provide facilities for mastery in any one of these as well as for a modicum of all. The first great error of our system comes in here. While we insist on passing our students through a rigid & cast-iron course of knowledge in everything, we give them real knowledge in nothing. [What does an average Bombay graduate who has taken English Literature for his optional subject, know of that literature? He has read a novel of Jane Austen or the Vicar of Wakefield, a poem of Tennyson or a book of Milton, at most two plays of Shakespeare, a work of Bacon's or Burke's full of ideas which he is totally incompetent to digest and one or two stray books of Pope, Dryden, Spenser or other, & to crown this pretentious little heap a mass of secondhand criticism dealing with poets & writers of whom he has not studied a single line. When we remember that English is the main study of our schools & colleges, what a miserable outturn is this, what a wretched little mouse out of that mountain of drudgery from which the

voice of the oppressed student is heard painfully & monotonously repeating like Valmekie under his mound the lesson with which he has been crammed. But he is far more unfortunate than Valmekie, his mar mar mar has not been converted into Ram Ram Ram; for while he thinks he has been repeating the saving word which gives intellectual salvation, it has been unknown to him converted into a death dealing word which causes intellectual sterility & impotence.]¹

Mathematics for instance is a subject in which it ought not to be difficult to give thorough knowledge, for most of its paths are well beaten and being a precise & definite subject it does not in itself demand so much & such various powers of original thought & appreciation as literature & history; yet it is the invariable experience of the most brilliant mathematical students who go from Calcutta or Bombay to Cambridge that after the first year they have exhausted all they have already learned and have to enter on entirely new & unfamiliar result. It is surely a deplorable thing that it should be impossible to acquire a thorough mathematical education in India, that one should have to go thousands of miles and spend thousands of rupees in order to get it. Again if we look at Science, what is the result of the pitiful modicum of science acquired under our system? At the best it turns out good teachers who can turn others through the same mill in which they themselves have been ground. But the object of scientific instruction [*incomplete*]

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1 *Passage bracketed by Sri Aurobindo in the manuscript.*

(2)



The Noble Truths and The Noble Path

The Mother

The Four Noble Truths are:

- (1) Life—taken in the sense of ordinary life, the life of ignorance and falsehood—is indissolubly linked with suffering: suffering of the body and suffering of the mind.
- (2) The cause of suffering is desire, which is caused by ignorance of the nature of separative life.
- (3) There is a way to escape from suffering, to put an end to pain.
- (4) This liberation is obtained by following the discipline of the Eightfold Path which gradually purifies the mind from the Ignorance. The fourth Truth is called the method of the Eightfold Path.

The Noble Path consists in a training in the following eight stages:

- (1) **Correct seeing.** To see things as they are, that is to say, a pure, accurate vision, the best vision.

Three conditions characterise existence: pain, impermanence, the absence of a fixed ego. So the Dhammapada says. But it is not quite that, it is rather the absence of a fixed, durable and separate personality in the psychological aggregate, the lack of a true continuity in the personal consciousness. It is for this reason that, for example, in the ordinary state one cannot remember one's past lives nor have the sense of a conscious continuity through all one's lives.

The first point then is to see correctly, and to see correctly is to see that pain is associated with ordinary life, that all things are impermanent and that there is no continuity in the personal consciousness.

- (2) **Correct intention or desire.** But the same word “desire” should not have been used, because we have just been told that we should not have

desire. It is rather “correct aspiration”. The word “desire” should be replaced by “aspiration”.

“To be freed from attachments and to have kind thoughts for everything that exists.” To be constantly in a state of kindness. To wish the best for all, always.

(3) **Correct speech that hurts none.** *Never speak uselessly and scrupulously avoid all malevolent speech.*

(4) **Correct behaviour—peaceful, honest.** *From all points of view, not only materially, but morally, mentally. Mental honesty is one of the most difficult things to achieve.*

(5) **Correct way of living.** *Not to cause harm or danger to any creature.* This is relatively easy to understand. There are people who carry this principle to the extreme, against all common sense. Those who put a handkerchief to their mouths, for example, so as not to swallow germs, who have the path in front of them swept so as not to step on an insect. This seems to me a little excessive, because the whole of life as it is at present is made up of destruction.

But if you understand the text correctly, it means that one must avoid all possibility of doing harm, one must not deliberately endanger any creature. *You can include here all living creatures and if you extend this care and this kindness to everything that lives in the universe, it will be very favourable to your inner growth.*

(6) **Correct effort.** Do not make useless efforts for useless things, rather keep all the energy of your effort to conquer ignorance and free yourself from falsehood. That you can never do too much.

(7) *The seventh principle comes to confirm the sixth: correct vigilance.*

You must have an active and vigilant mind. Do not live in a half-somnolence, half-unconsciousness—usually in life you let yourself go, come what may! This is what everyone does. Now and then you wake up and you realise that you have wasted your time; then you make a big effort only to fall back again, a minute later, into indolence. It would be better to have something less vehement but more constant.

(8) *And finally, correct contemplation.* Egoless thought concentrated on the essence of things, on the inmost truth and on the goal to be attained.

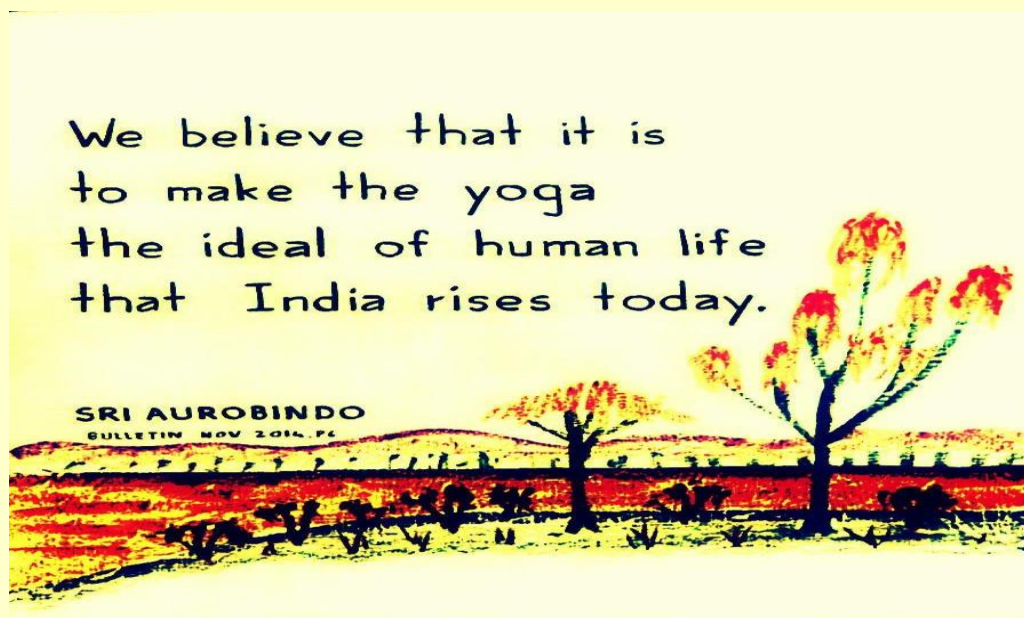
How often there is a kind of emptiness in the course of life, an unoccupied moment, a few minutes, sometimes more. And what do you do? Immediately you try to distract yourself, and you invent some foolishness or other to pass your time. That is a common fact. All men, from the youngest to the oldest, spend most of their time in trying not to be bored. Their pet aversion is boredom and the way to escape from boredom is to act foolishly.

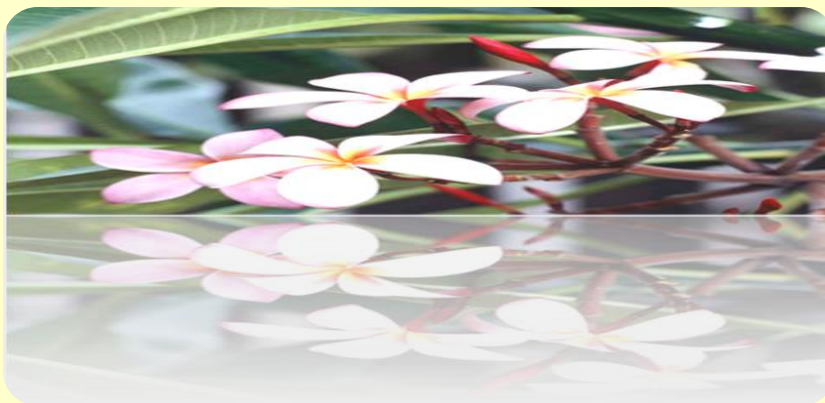
Well, there is a better way than that—to remember.

When you have a little time, whether it is one hour or a few minutes, tell yourself, “At last, I have some time to concentrate, to collect myself, to relive the purpose of my life, to offer myself to the True and the Eternal.” If you took care to do this each time you are not harassed by outer circumstances, you would find out that you were advancing very quickly on the path. Instead of wasting your time in chattering, in doing useless things, reading things that lower the consciousness—to choose only the best cases, I am not speaking of other imbecilities which are much more serious —instead of trying to make yourself giddy, to make time, that is already so short, still shorter only to realise at the end of your life that you have lost three-quarters of your chance—then you want to put in double time, but that does not work—it is better to be moderate,

balanced, patient, quiet, but never to lose an opportunity that is given to you, that is to say, to utilise for the true purpose the unoccupied moment before you. When you have nothing to do, you become restless, you run about, you meet friends, you take a walk, to speak only of the best; I am not referring to things that are obviously not to be done.

Instead of that, sit down quietly before the sky, before the sea or under trees, whatever is possible (here you have all of them) and try to realise one of these things—to understand why you live, to learn how you must live, to ponder over what you want to do and what should be done, what is the best way of escaping from the ignorance and falsehood and pain in which you live. (3)





Acknowledgements

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1. The Mother, Collected Works of The Mother, CWM, 3; 183
2. Sri Aurobindo, Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, CWSA, 1; 357-362
3. The Mother, Collected Works of The Mother, CWM, 3; 248-51

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