

A Bhāgavata Philosophy of Education – Some Preliminary Thoughts –

Philosophy as a field of study is generally divided into four branches: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics (or praxis), and aesthetics. Thus, for ease of organization, we will discuss philosophy of education in these four areas. The foundational principles of education given below are drawn from the first three verses of the Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, which contain the essence of the entire Purāṇa.

The purpose of this short essay is to outline broad principles and purposes of education, not to delineate specific methods and strategies. Our thoughts here are preliminary and much more can be (and has been) said about this topic. Thus, we invite readers to modify and develop these ideas further.

All direct quotations (found in parentheses) are taken from the first three verses of the Bhāgavatam (1.1.1-3), and therefore no verse numbers are given here. We encourage the reader to carefully study Śrīla Prabhupāda's translations and purports on these three verses before reading this essay.

Aesthetics of Education

We begin with aesthetics because of Śrī Caitanya Mahāprabhu's conviction that pure love for Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate purpose of human life. Thus, it follows that the purpose of education, for adults and children, is to help them cultivate *prema*. This love for Kṛṣṇa is already present within the individual's heart. The teacher need only reawaken the students' relationship with Kṛṣṇa (*pibata bhagavatam rasam ālayam*), and teach them to express that relationship through practical devotional service and good character.

Ethics of Education

First and foremost, the sign of an educated person is good character, and the most important element of character is compassion for other living entities (*śivadam tāpa-trayonmūlanam*). Thus, the Bhāgavatam defines knowledge as "reality distinguished from illusion for the welfare of all." In other words, it is not enough for something to be factual; it must also be beneficial for others.

From a teacher's perspective, this means that he or she must meet the students where they are at, and tailor instruction to their individual needs, just as Nārada Muni taught Prahlāda and Dhruva in different ways. This requires helping students advance toward the love for Kṛṣṇa, but also ensuring that they have the skills and knowledge needed to satisfy their material, temporal needs. This dual goal is best accomplished through the practice of *dharma*, namely, ethical action in this world based upon a person's psycho-social nature. By diligently practicing their own *dharmas* in the world, students can advance toward the ultimate *dharma*, namely devotional service to the Supreme (*dharmah projjhita-kaitavo 'tra paramah*).

Epistemology of Education

All education, whether spiritual or material, requires the guidance of a teacher, or guru (*śuka-mukhād amṛta-drava-saṁyutam*), who receives knowledge through a lineage of teachers. The relationship between teacher and student creates the circumstances that lead to knowledge. The student approaches the teacher with both humility and inquisitiveness, since neither blind following nor absurd inquiry are helpful. In return, the teacher helps the student develop powers of observation/experience, *pratyakṣa* (*tejo-vāri-mṛdāṁ vinimayaḥ*), as well as strong reasoning skills, *anumāna* (*anvayād itarataś ca*), but most importantly, the ability to hear and reflect upon *śāstra* (*tene brahma hr̥dā*). The teacher must model the abilities and qualities he or she wishes to cultivate in the student.

Metaphysics of Education

The teacher uses these methods in order to help the student distinguish reality from illusion (*vedyaṁ vāstavam*). This reality is Kṛṣṇa, the highest truth (*satyaṁ param*), along with his energies—the spiritual realm (*dhāmnā svena*), the material creation (*janmādy asya yataḥ, yatra trisargo 'mṛṣā*), and the living beings (*dhīmahi*), who are eternal spirit souls, distinct from matter. There, every student is by nature good at heart, even if they are conditioned by less-desirable, external qualities. In other words, the Bhāgavata asserts that there is an eternal, Absolute Truth that transcends and yet pervades the temporal reality of social, political, and historical contexts.

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