

Higher Education in Relation to Other Aspects of ISKCON Education

Benefits of Higher Education

Postsecondary education is essential for our children, whether it be vocational school, professional qualifications, or university degrees. Most children will go on to become gr̥hasthas, and thus finding a secure career is essential to their material and spiritual stability. In today's economic environment, most jobs require some higher education for employment or promotion.

Furthermore, a university education develops awareness of modern standards of knowledge as well as social issues that are currently under debate. Being able to articulate our Kṛṣṇa consciousness in relationship to modern standards of knowledge is crucial to the personal and public life of a devotee. A devotee should be able to relate spiritual knowledge to material knowledge and apply spiritual knowledge to contemporary social issues. This will make the devotee's faith stable in the face of many alternatives, and allow him or her to convince others of spiritual life.

For all devotee children, a higher education develops strong quantitative and communication skills—writing, public speaking, formal presentation, reading comprehension, and debate. These are essential skills for the life of a devotee. Overall, a university education continues to be one of the best investments a person can make.

Higher Education Initiatives Within and “Near” ISKCON

As yet, there are few accredited degrees available within ISKCON. Bhaktivedanta College in Belgium offers an undergraduate degree in Religious Studies and an MBA in Business. Similarly, Bhaktivedanta College in Hungary offers degrees in Religious Studies, plus Yoga, Ayurveda, and a number of other related subjects. Bhaktivedanta Institute in Mumbai offers an M.S. in Consciousness Studies in affiliation with Indian universities. The North American Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies (NIOS) as yet does not offer degrees, but it is closely affiliated with several universities in Peru, where it hosts conferences, collaborates with faculty, and mentors students.

Outside ISKCON, we have the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, which has been successful in training a large cohort of devotee-scholars in Vaisnava theology, history, and philosophy. After receiving their Masters and PhDs, several have gone on to take up full time academic positions at universities around the world. A promising new PhD in Dharmic Studies has begun at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where the first cohort is making its way through the program.

Preparing ISKCON's Children for Higher Education

The vast majority of devotee children attend external universities, and thus it is essential for ISKCON's educational system to consider carefully how best to prepare our children for the secular university. Here are some pointers from my experience of teaching in several universities for over a decade:

1. During children's primary education, it is essential to focus on cultivating strong skills in reading, writing, and math. Other subjects are a bonus, but if children are adept in reading, writing, and math, they can catch up on the rest in college. If, however, students are weak in these basic skills, then professors spend all their time teaching students to read and write, rather than the more advanced skills of their field, like history, physics, or engineering.
2. The most important life habits for higher education are the ability to work independently, manage time well, and listen attentively. Indeed, the practice of sitting in Bhāgavatam class, although seemingly "old-fashioned," teaches the valuable skill of attentive listening. Despite all the emphasis on visual, interactive, and engaged learning, there is no substitute for the fundamental role of listening.
3. As children approach college age, we can help them select a university that will be conducive for both their material and spiritual well-being. While there are many guides available for selecting a reputed, well-connected college, the single-most important factor for spiritual well-being is the association of other devotees. It is imperative for children to attend a university where strong devotee association is available, either through on-campus programs, a local temple, or bhakti-vṛkṣa.
4. Finally, it is useful to connect our college students with devotee faculty mentors in their chosen career or field of study. Vaiṣṇava faculty are experienced at negotiating the spiritual challenges that are specific to their academic field (more on that below) and they are usually happy to mentor devotee students. Indeed, we need to build a database of Vaiṣṇava scholars around North America who are willing to serve as mentors in their field.

Challenges for a Devotee in College

The importance of good mentorship becomes all the more apparent when we consider the many challenges that a child must face upon entering the university. Here are a couple:

1. The university is the first opportunity for many young adults to express their independence and shape their identity. The normal social restrictions on sense gratification are much reduced, and the temptations to experiment are strong. The most important counterbalance to campus hedonism is Vaiṣṇava association (as discussed above), from which all other elements of Kṛṣṇa consciousness emerge.
2. The intellectual challenges are more subtle and therefore more powerful. These include the ideas of postmodernism, historical criticism, social criticism, and scientism, which can shake a person's faith to the core. These theories are pervasive in the university, even when they are not being explicitly taught in the classroom, and each one of them deserves a separate essay to explain fully. Suffice it to say that the strongest support for faith is deep study of śāstra in a child's pre-college years.

Śāstric Study in the Context of Higher Education

Regular study of śāstra in the early years is essential if we want our children to remain strong devotees later in life, particularly through the college years. The Śrīmad Bhāgavatam is especially important for

our children to develop strong faith, critical thinking skills, and the intelligence to see the flaws in materialistic worldviews. My mother, Aruddhā Devī Dāsī, has written extensively about the benefits of studying Śrīla Prabhupāda’s books with children, particularly Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, and formulated an effective method for doing so. This can be found in her book, *Homeschooling Kṛṣṇa’s Children* (BBT) as well as *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam: A Comprehensive Guide for Young Readers* (Torchlight). Here, I offer just a few pointers in relation to higher education.

1. Often, children’s śāstric education is reduced to “values” education—stories like Dhruva or Prahlāda are selected from the Bhāgavatam and then distilled for moral values, such as determination, tolerance, freedom from anger, etc. While this is an important element of śāstric education, focusing only on values shortchanges śāstra and does a disservice to our children. Śāstra can teach our children so much more than just values. They can learn how to think critically, how to argue against atheistic and materialistic worldviews, how to negotiate between shades of good and bad (since things are rarely black and white in śāstra), how to deal with apparent contradictions, and most importantly, how to build a deep, rational, and emotional relationship with Kṛṣṇa. Śāstra is not always predictable in its outcomes, but it is non-different from Kṛṣṇa, and so direct engagement with śāstra will do wonders for our children, and prepare them for the skeptical world of academia.
2. It is helpful for schoolteachers to be aware of the contemporary debates, theories, and social issues that children will face in college and beyond. Śāstric study is more effective (for adults and for children, at a level appropriate to their age) if we can apply śāstra to contemporary social issues, like environmental degradation, interreligious conflict, and human inequality, and defend it in the face of theories like postmodernism and scientism. Higher education provides this context, and thus it is a valuable companion to scriptural study.

There is little doubt that all components of ISKCON’s educational system—primary and secondary, śāstric, varnāśrama, or higher education—need to work together. Each component relies on the others to function successfully and produce the best results for the good of society. This essay is a brief attempt to show the relationship between higher education and other elements of ISKCON education.

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