What is Theosophical Education?

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In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the establishment of theosophical schools in various parts of the world. The General Council of the Theosophical Society has approved the putting up a new school in Adyar that is expected to start in 2019. The Philippines has six schools and plans to set up a seventh one by next year. The Indian Section has very recently reacquired the management of six schools that have been independently run for many decades, and the section plans to transform them into theosophical schools. Argentina, Brazil and Kenya have expressed serious interest in setting up such educational institutions. There are initiatives to convert the charity schools under the Theosophical Order of Service in India into theosophical schools.

It is timely then to review the question: What really is theosophical education? Is it any school that is run by theosophical organizations? Is it a school that teaches theosophy?

Since the early years, theosophical leaders have used the phrase "theosophical education" to refer to a kind of educational approach that embody certain characteristics. A charity school run by the Theosophical Society is not necessarily a theosophical school in the strict sense.

Two years before her death, H. P. Blavatsky stressed the importance of putting up theosophical schools. She described the objectives of such a school as follows:

> If we had money, we would found schools which would turn out something else than reading and writing candidates for starvation. Children should above all be taught self-reliance, love for all men, altruism, mutual charity, and more than anything else, to think and reason for themselves. We would reduce the purely mechanical work of the memory to an absolute minimum, and devote the time to the development and training of the inner senses, faculties and latent capacities. We would endeavour to deal with each child as a unit, and to educate it so as to produce the most harmonious and equal unfoldment of its powers, in order that its special aptitudes should find their full natural development. We should aim at creating free men and women, free intellectually, free morally, unprejudiced in all respects, and above all things, unselfish. And we believe that much if not all of this could be obtained by proper and truly theosophical education. (*Key to Theosophy*, Sec. 13)

Note that in the above statement, she said nothing about teaching theosophy. Theosophical Education is primarily about the unfolding of latent faculties and the nurturing of certain qualities in the individual.

N. Sri Ram, the fifth president of the Theosophical Society, wrote in the same vein:

> What we call Theosophical Education must be education in a real sense, not the inculcation of a few ideas which we may label as Theosophy. First of all, it has to be realized that education is primarily education of the individual, not instruction in any subject or the teaching of any technique, although these may be very necessary, and should come in incidentally. It is not imparting anything from without so much as the drawing out of what is within, the capacities that are already in the Ego or soul, fostering the process of its natural growth and development in its fresh manifestation at a period when such help is greatly needed. (*The Theosophist*, April, 1960)

A pioneer in this kind of education is J. Krishnamurti, who had put up eight schools in India, United States and England. He wrote:

> The function of education is to create human beings who are integrated and therefore intelligent. . . . Education in the true sense is helping the individual to be mature and free, to flower greatly in love and goodness. (*Education and the Significance of Life*, Ch. 1 & 2)

Theosophical education, then, is meant to prepare a young individual to face not only the challenges of social life (such as career or financial stability) but to understand better the art and science of living and to have the capacity to live according to such insights. It involves an understanding of the growth process of human beings and to attain the highest possibilities of a truly mature individual.

It will be noted that the end of such a growth process is not simply material or social "success", but the full development of a human being. While a theosophical school will help young people to develop needed skills to become effective in their career and attain financial stability, such skills are only a part of a larger goal which is the overall wholesomeness of the life of the individual. There is no point in making a person a financial success if the person is unhappy, unscrupulous or evil. The present world situation is so mired in violence, injustice, greed and selfishness that any school that helps mold more of such people will actually be doing more harm to the world than good.

Personality Development

A theosophical school is first an institution for the development of the personality and character of the child. This is far more important than any skills that they learn in the institution.

Personality refers to that part of the human being that is molded primarily by the environment – habits, language, attitudes, relationships, beliefs, behavior, etc. The molding happens from birth to adulthood. These can be simple things like patiently queuing in a line, brushing one's teeth every day, or smoking cigarettes. When the environment is unwholesome, then the child acquires an unwholesome personality – counterproductive habits, ineffective relationship approaches, wrong beliefs, biases or

other forms of conditionings. If these have already been learned from home or outside, then a theosophical school should guide them to undo these harmful qualities, such as through self-awareness processing.

A good and effective school is an environment that is deliberately designed to cultivate wholesome personality traits – healthy habits, self-discipline, respectfulness, positiveness, basic skills such as language proficiency, etc. They are taught by exposure and repetition after explaining to them why they are worthwhile behaviors. These traits are not inculcated using threats, coercion, punishments or even rewards. It is shown by example and imbibed through simple repetition of the behavior in a natural, cheerful and even fun manner. Personality qualities are absorbed almost unconsciously in this way.

Character Building

Character is quite different from personality. It arises from a conscious recognition of what is right and proper. It is the instilling and realization of wholesome values and their incorporation into one's daily life. While personality is the product of habits, character is the product of insights and understanding.

It must be noted that wholesome personality development serves as an important foundation of character building. When the personality is badly formed, then it can be a formidable obstacle to the development of right character. For example, a child that learns to be afraid (a personality trait) will tend to learn to lie (a fault in character). Fear becomes a barrier to the development of honesty and integrity. A child that learns to be angry as a mode of self-defense will become less capable of loving others because anger has the tendency to want to hurt another, a trait opposite to that of love.

This is the reason why personality and character development go hand in hand. One affects the other. A school environment must take care that unhelpful personality traits such as fear, violence, insecurity or competitiveness are not encouraged or nurtured in the campus environment. Then the building of right character or the absorption of impersonal values becomes easier. The whole process starts from the entire culture of the school, involving the principal, headmaster, the faculty members, the staff as well as the policies and regulations of the school. When children fear the teachers or the principal, then the nurturing process becomes unhealthy.

Becoming a Free Individual

A theosophical school should endeavor to cultivate minds that are open, free, rational and unprejudiced.

Society has a powerful way of intimidating people to adopt its values, customs and behaviors, even if such ways are wrong or harmful. Horrid examples are so-called "honor killings", suicide bombings and genital mutilation. It does this unconsciously much of the time. Children grow up believing in many things that are absurd, contradictory, irrational, violent and wrong. For example, when repeatedly told so, they easily slide into believing in a God who is perfect but who repents what he has done, or a God who is perfectly loving and at the same time sends his creatures to eternal hell. They also unknowingly adopt the behaviors of adults without having the chance to question whether they are wholesome or not, right or not. Thus they pick up the habit of smoking even if they know that cigarettes can cause cancer or shorten their lives.

A good school will help young people become aware of these invisible shackles of the mind. Then they have the option to free themselves from these chains. Therefore, a theosophical school cannot be a sectarian school – it cannot even be a "theosophical" school in the sense that it is trying to make students believe in such a thing as theosophy. Its aim is to make the mind free in order that a person is a capable of searching for the truth without imposed blinders.

Capacity for Happiness

A school must be a happy place. What's the point of being a famous writer, a computer genius or a multi-billionaire when one is unhappy? Many years ago, one of the richest persons in the world committed suicide. His wealth did not give him meaning, peace and happiness.

Nurturing the capacity for happiness in a person is a semi-science. It is based on the principle of cause and effect. In the same way that one can oppress and bully people to make them miserable, so can one appreciate and love others to make them feel accepted, loved and happy.

A happy school does not mean an easy school. Students should be encouraged to take difficult challenges and explore new frontiers without the unhappiness caused by low grades, threats or punishment. One may be tired, but one feels fulfilled.

Altruism

A human being has a conditioned personality that tends to be self-centered and self-protective. This is natural and is needed for survival. It has an evolutionary origin and it is a trait that humans have in common with animals. This is the source of selfishness in human beings.

On the other hand, human beings have a higher faculty of the mind that is capable of recognizing objective reality, fairness and justice. For example, our outer personality will delight in finding someone's wallet in a public place and wants to keep it for oneself. But our higher mind will recognize that it is someone else's wallet and we need to return it to the rightful owner. The cultivation of this higher faculty is what truly makes us "civilized" and ethical. We think of the larger whole rather than just ourselves. We don't do unethical acts because if everyone else does what we do, then everyone will be harmed and society will be chaotic, violent and insecure.

A theosophical school therefore will nurture unselfish individuals who are ready to help others while recognizing the duty to protect and take care of one's own legitimate needs.

Transformative Education

Such a school needs to be a transformative one. Transformation means not just changing from one thing to another on the same level, but a change from one level to a higher and more holistic level. It entails the awakening of one's higher faculties and perceptive capacities – seeing what is just and right; appreciating love and compassion; seeing reality impersonally. In theosophical terms, it is the awakening of the higher triangle consisting of the higher mind, intuition and spirituality, and eventually, self-transcendence.

What about Teaching Theosophy?

The teaching of the Ageless Wisdom should be part of the curriculum of a theosophical school. It is meant to introduce perennial insights and wisdom of great sages and spiritual people. When they are true and clearly explained, they will strike a chord in heart of the student, a recognition of the validity and truth of the principles. If they are false, they should be exposed as such during the free inquiry of a theosophical classroom. Theosophy should never be taught as a dogma where a students feel a subtle ostracism if they are not convinced of it.

In Golden Link College, several additional subjects are added to the curriculum given by the government. Among those added are Theosophy, Comparative Religion and Philosophy. These classes are seedbeds of new ideas and concepts, they foster free discussions and debates without fear of being rejected for one's unconventional views.

Skills and Knowledge

The school of course needs to teach the competencies that one needs in the world – professional skills and knowledge, such as accountancy, computer proficiency, mathematics, etc.

But there are two kinds of skills that needs to be distinguised: life skills and professional skills.

Life skills are competencies that make one effective in whatever one chooses to do, regardless of the field or profession that one is involved in. Examples of these are perseverance, patience, amiability, effectiveness in communication, critical thinking, resourcefulness, creativity, self-discipline and positiveness. Without these, one becomes less effective in one's life-work.

Summary

A theosophical school endeavors to nurture in a wholesome way the whole human being, not just one's money-earning skills. Individuals with wholesome character, personality and life skills can practically be effective in any profession or work that they may find themselves in. Professional or technical skills can be learned at any age, but the fundamental qualities of a person need to be laid down well from childhood. This is the important function of a theosophical school. Based on deep insights on the nature of human beings, their growth processes, origin and destiny, the school develops a culture and curriculum that foster the growth of higher faculties that makes one more mature and effective. It prepares an individual for a life of meaningfulness, spirituality, happiness and service. It seeks to nurture people who will make this world a harmonious and peaceful place.