



The Golden Gift

Once upon a time, long, long ago, God decided to give a very special gift to the human beings, for they were very dear to him. He thought, 'Perhaps the most precious gift that he could give all human beings was to create a place in their hearts where he could dwell'. And he thought to himself, 'What is a gift without some beautiful wrapping paper?' And so he went about creating the most beautiful, enchanting wrapping paper for his gift, which had in it enchanting streams, beautiful mountains, lasting friendships, the most enduring love... it bore the fragrance of the most exotic fruits of deep forests... the most beautiful unimaginable things. In fact, this wrapping paper (one could also call it Maya) was so enchanting that all the human beings when they received this wonderful gift, were so entranced by this fascinating wrapping paper that they just could not take their eyes off it. They forgot everything else and were deeply immersed in looking at it, in experiencing it, in unravelling it.

Well the story doesn't end here. You see, the human race was so excited to get this beautifully wrapped present that they didn't think to look inside to see what it contained... except a few who once in a while looked up and thanked God. Well, God thought, 'Ah, now they are paying a little attention to me.' So he nudged a few of them and said, 'Hullo, wouldn't you like to look at what's inside there?' And they said, 'Inside? What could be inside? This is so amazingly beautiful, so enchanting!' And they went back to their enchanting wrapping paper again. God chuckled and he said to them, 'Here, let me show you.' And he very gently tore at a few people's presents. When they saw the rips they were broken-hearted. They started wailing and crying and said to him, 'You meanie! You ruined my life. You said you will give me joy and happiness and

look what you have done! You have destroyed this beautiful present that you have given me. And you are supposed to be kind and loving. Why did you rip my gift?'

The sound of the wailing was almost deafening and God didn't know what to do. He thought, 'Well, they are young and inexperienced, perhaps I shouldn't be so harsh, perhaps I should wait. They will soon realise and begin to look inside.' But, in a corner, he saw a little child sitting with a smile on her face, apparently not disturbed, not upset with him for ru-



ining her gift by ripping it open. He looked at her and said, 'Why are you not crying? Aren't you upset also?' And she said to him, 'No, I am not. Because I figure that you are the one who has given us this gift and if you are tearing it and if you are ripping it apart, you must know what you are doing.' And God smiled again and said, 'Yes I know what I am doing. Will you allow me to show you?' The child said, 'Yes.' And then he ripped the entire wrapping paper off. He said to her,

'Look, look inside.' And she looked. And deep inside she saw the most beautiful, luminous golden light that came out and engulfed her. She felt suddenly that she had found all the knowledge, the love, the beauty, the wisdom, and she felt, 'Ah, I found what is the reason and purpose of my life. I found why I am here.'

Well, this little story shows very simply the most beautiful quality that all children have – the quality of trust, the quality of faith. Spontaneous trust in their elders, in whom they look up to. And as we look up to God, for children their gods are their teachers and their parents. They look up to you with respect, with love, with reverence. And therefore, the question that one needs to ask is, 'As a guide, as a representative whom the child looks up to, what is the most important gift and present that we will be giving our children?'



THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT

‘What is the most precious gift that you give to a child?’ Here I’d like to come to something that I have found as my guiding principle and which I know that a lot of us perhaps are trying to practice. It is what The Mother has written. Someone asked her, ‘What is the most important gift that one can give to a child, what is the finest thing as a teacher that I am supposed to do, what is my role as a teacher?’ And she replied that the finest gift one can give to a child is to teach them to know themselves and to choose their own destiny, the path they will follow. To teach them to look at themselves, understand themselves, and to will what they want to be. That is infinitely more important than teaching them what happened on earth in former times or even how the earth was built, and so on, so forth. Indeed, she went on, ‘this information is very important and essential if one has to live in the world, one should know all about how the world works, what happens, the mechanics of the world – science, history, geography, and so on, but still if you notice, at any age, if you are studious and have the will to do it, you can learn all these things from books, and you can work on yourself and gain this knowledge. You do not need to go to school for that. There are enough books in the world to teach you these things.’ In a way, the wrapping paper that we just heard about is the wrapping paper that we engulf our children with. The hordes of information that we - sometimes even if we don’t want to - are compelled to pass on to them... the whole illusion of knowledge that we leave them with. In fact, the golden gift, or the finest gift that we can give to a child, is to find that inner presence, that inner light that knows and that can guide it towards the fulfilment of his or her fullest potential.

CHANGING ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Now let us shift the scene to a new perspective. Shift it to the 21st century. Look around and see what is happening now. We find that with the coming of information technology, with the internet revolution, with television, with satellites, with the whole new paradigm of learning-teaching, the information age that has come upon mankind all over the globe, we find that whatever we could prescribe, whatever the textbooks could possibly think of, is insufficient, mediocre, meagre compared to the huge re-

sources, huge amount of information and knowledge available to young children at the tap of a button. They know and they can know far more than you and I sitting here. And, therefore, one has to re-examine the role of the teacher, the whole role of teaching and learning. It will change, it is bound to change, because teachers no longer need to be information processing machines, giving out information day after day, year after year.

Now in the 21st century, no longer do we as teachers have to give information. Rather our whole role needs to be redefined to training the faculties of the child, to acquire information for himself and herself. So really what we should be teaching in our Geography classes or our History classes or our Mathematics classes, is training the mind to think, developing the 7 faculties of the mind – of Concentration, of Reasoning, of Judgment, of Comparison; training the character and values of the person, so that when she goes out in the world with these amazing choices, she can make the right choices. Our whole shift has to come about from the way we teach. Perhaps tomorrow instead of the teacher reciting lessons or explaining, each child will have a computer screen – they already do when they go home. A lot of the information that they receive in class, if it weren’t for the pressure of exams and tests, would in any case be obsolete. But because of the system – we, you and I and the student, in a way, is forced to do many things that our better sense knows not to.

And yet, how do we cope? We have not as yet shifted to the new way, we are still somewhere in between. We are discussing these things. I know a lot of schools which are giving their teachers lessons in IT, familiarising themselves with internet, bringing in workshops and new methodologies for teaching. But the question remains, how do we, right now, prepare ourselves firstly, and our children, to face the future. For, after all, what is the purpose of education, if it is not for the child to be able to face the future, to be a master of his future, to be a noble, great citizen? How does he become that?

Now these two things we began with seem to be divergent. On the one hand, talking about knowing oneself, going within and finding the truth of one’s life, and on the other hand, we are talking about technology, information, the internet revolution. Well, they are not. They are



actually coming together and bringing something that was the core of Indian education, together. Because, the teacher no longer needs to be mechanical. The teacher can start doing the real business of teaching, which is to help the child to know himself, to expand the possibilities of his mind, to train his mind and his spirit, to greaten his capacities as a human being. And information, which is what nine-tenths of our time is taken by, can then be relegated to perhaps four-tenths or two-tenths of our time.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEACHER?

Coming to the third idea that I'd like to present today, 'What makes a good teacher? What encourages children to learn? What helps the child to learn? How do I, how do we become great teachers?' Again, I draw the wisdom from The Mother's teachings. She said that the most important thing for the teacher is to create the interest in the child. If you can create interest in a child to learn, if the one thing you can gift him is this amazing zeal, enthusiasm to learn, then you can be quite sure that what normally would have taken him years of learning, he would be able to do in a second.

Each child has their own learning mechanism and time. Something from within awakens to just motivate that child to make an immense effort to learn. Sometimes years go by, months go by, nothing happens. The teacher wanting to finish things, wanting that at this age this has to happen, forces the child. But there is no child that would leave your school without knowing everything that you possibly wanted him or her to know. Yet we insist that at age 4 she must know this, at age 5 she must know that, at age 6 she must know this. But you see real life - you will see there is not one failure. In fact, the people who fail are the people who push too hard. I have seen people who break down. Some of the finest students in school couldn't take the pressure of life, they were so used to excelling - nervous breakdown, one committed suicide.

Everything is not the 3 R's. What about the nature of the person? What about the character of the person? What will that person do when he grows up? These are larger issues that we need to keep in our consciousness when we go into the classroom and



deal with each individual child in his or her uniqueness. Perhaps the girl, who is coming first in your class, is a very nervous person. Perhaps the pressure on her to constantly excel isn't the best thing for her nature, her character and her growth. Look at things in different ways. It doesn't necessarily have to be so. But the stereotypes that, in a way, the system forces us to get into, life always topples upside down. You see in life things are not as they seem to be, things sometimes change. So we come to the fundamental root of learning and that is interest, enthusiasm and love for progress. Just give that love to learn, to progress, to a child and you have done your job. After that she will master your English lessons or your geography lessons or your history lessons.

Another very interesting thing - we always like to have students who do well in our classroom. And the ones who don't do so well, whether we say it or not, whether we show it or not, we do give that feeling, 'Oh you are not so good, you are not up to it, you are a little dumb, you are a bit stupid.' You may not say it, but the child receives those messages from you. What does the child do when he receives such messages? He internalises them immediately. He begins to feel a lack of confidence in his own ability and even if he were to master it, but just that idea in his head, 'Oh I am not good, I am weak in this, I can't do this, I am too stupid'. It could be any kind of subject and any phobia. It is very important as teachers to remember that the one thing that can help children to overcome any kind of difficulty is encouragement. I remember as a child my favourite teacher was the one who gave me just that little bit of encouragement. She said, 'You write very well'. I would just go home and keep writing essays, because I thought, 'Oh she is going to read my essay tomorrow. She's going to tell me how wonderful it is.' I went into my mathematics class. My mathematics teacher would see me and she would say, 'Oh, you are here again.' By the end of it I would be playing pranks, and my basic intention was that somehow she would throw me out of class. After a while she would enter the class and I would exit. It was an understanding.

But what messages did I get from her? Just when I was beginning to feel that perhaps I could do well in mathematics, firstly I didn't do well



in mathematics, and secondly, she gave me a complex about my ability to do maths. It took me years to unlearn. Now think about yourself. Ask yourself this question, 'Who was your favourite teacher when you were a child? Who was the teacher that you liked most? What were her qualities? Why did you like her? What was that special something that attracted you to her, that made you want to do that much more for her than you would do for another teacher? What was the difference in their attitudes?' Well, these are very important when you go into your classroom – to remember these things, because we tend to forget when we grow old how we learnt and how we felt when we were young, when we were students. It is the same psychology that works with our students today. Try it for yourself, you will see, just a simple pat, just a word of encouragement can do wonders to a child.

MEDITATION & CONCENTRATION

Now, I come to my final idea today. The role and importance of meditation and concentration in learning. I think that it is a very essential part of the education system that has been lost. We have to thank Macaulay, but we also have to thank ourselves, for you know we have had 50 years to undo but we haven't done it. We are still based on an alien environment of education. What helps you to learn? When do you learn best? When you are relaxed, don't you? If you had somebody with the fear of god standing next to you I think your mind would be paralysed. So if you learn best when you are relaxed and quiet, when your emotions are not interfering, when you don't have a thousand thoughts entering you, when you don't feel disturbed – the same goes for the student. We all know this I suppose. In the ancient days, in the *gurukul*, the first thing that the teacher taught the students was how to concentrate, how to meditate, how to become a master of his mind and of his heart, emotions and of his body. For until one has a complete knowledge and ability to focus one's concentration completely on one thing, one can never learn. You know, Swami Vivekananda used to say that on the power of concentration of a person will depend the greatness of a man; the greater his concentration, the greater his ability to acquire any knowledge. In fact, he said, that with the power of concentration there is no knowledge that you cannot ac-

quire. He would often tell the students, firstly, develop concentration, develop great concentration, so that with your concentration you can master anything.

Now how do we develop concentration. There are many techniques. But one of the most basic, simplest, ancient techniques of concentration is first to learn how to meditate – to quieten down all the 3 main outer parts of our nature – our mind, our emotions and vital, and our body. Why should we meditate? Why should we begin our classes with meditation, with a moment of concentration? Why should we end our classes with meditation and concentration, or silence even, one minute of silence? There are 3 main stages in learning – the Information stage, the Assimilation stage and the Utilisation stage. If the child has to retain anything, all 3 must be present. If you notice you have 30 or 40 minute period, how much time do you spend on the first stage, Information? 20 minutes, 30 minutes, 40 minutes? Let us say 20 minutes. How much time do you spend in Assimilation, or do you spend time in Assimilation? What activity do you give a child to assimilate whatever you have taught him? How does he begin to use it, to assimilate it? What processes, what activities do you design for that? Something to think about. Because if you don't, it's gone only into the short term memory of the child, and then it's lost, it is just information. And the most important, Utilisation. If you can show me how this will be useful to my life, I will never forget what you have taught me. For example, if I show you the benefits of meditation, instead of just talking about it, you will never forget what it feels like to meditate. So what is that stage? It is Utilisation. Think about your lesson plan. Think about information, think about assimilation, activities for that. You ask the child questions, 'How do you think it would be relevant to your life, how do you think you can use this information that we have just studied?' Let him come up with how he can utilise it. You don't have to give all the answers. You have 50 bright children and I am sure they will think of ways. But you need to just ask them the question so that they begin to see the relevance of what they are studying to their daily life. Project work is the ideal way for both assimilation and utilisation.





But do it for everything. We can't. I know. Constraints. But in simple ways, even by questions you can do it. Always end your class with some questions. Always ask the child to come up with something new, something creative which he or she can contribute. Then it makes sense, otherwise it is just inputting.

Secondly, how does meditation help? Problem solving. If you have a problem (we all have problems) meditation and concentration help in solving any problem or difficulty. What is the basic major source? I have dealt with a lot of students, and when they come to me they ask only one question. 'I get very nervous before my exams. Can you tell me how to overcome my nervousness? I get so nervous that even though I have learnt everything, I come to my paper and I forget everything.' This is a very common problem that students face. Now, how do you help them to overcome that problem? One moment of concentration – if they got into the habit of it in their classrooms, you can imagine how much strength that would give them before they did their paper or before they came in – just learning to calm down, learning to overcome stress, which is one of the biggest things. Even you and I today go for meditation workshops and many times when you ask why do you want to learn meditation – 'Oh I have too much stress. I just want to de-stress.' Well the students are far more pressurised, especially at exam time.

Another use of meditation in learning is to gain knowledge. It is very funny that some of the brightest ideas that we have had, have been in periods of silence and solitude. One cannot imagine the gift that one can give to a child if he can experience that, those moments of silence, of solitude, contemplation and of peace. Because he will be carrying it to whatever he does, wherever he goes.

BELIEVE IN YOUR DREAMS

With that I'd like to end with a true story of Monty Roberts. This was a young boy who had gone to school. And in his school his teacher had asked the entire class, 'Write an essay about what you want to be. Write it in as much detail as possible. For example, if you want to be a musician write about what instrument you are going to play, where you are going to play, how you are going to develop yourself into a musician, what kind of a mu-

sician are you going to become.' At the end of the class everybody submitted their essays. Next week when class began she gave out the essays back to the various students, with a grade. One student got Fail. So after the class got over he went up to the teacher and said, 'Why have you failed me?' She said, 'Well, because what you have written is not practical. When you think about what you want to become, you must be practical. You can't just dream off. It has to be based in reality. You have written that you have 2000 acres of land, you have these various ranch buildings, you have so many horses - and this is impractical. It is impossible for you to get all this. Be practical. That's why I have failed you. But, this is not a final grade. You make it more practical, make it reasonable, make it something that you can achieve, bring it back to me tomorrow, and I will review it.' She gave back the essay. The boy was very discouraged and he went home. He was actually shattered. He went home and he spoke to his father. He said, 'What should I do? My teacher told me that this is impractical. But I believe in it. What should I do?' The father turned around and told him, 'My son, you must always do what you believe in. If you really think this is what you want to do and how it is going to be done, return the essay back to your teacher.' The boy went back the next day and told his teacher, 'Thank you, but I would rather keep my dream than have your grade.' And he returned the essay back. The story doesn't end here. Many years later, he was the famous Monty Roberts. He had this magnificent massive ranch, far greater than any dream that he could have written. He was one of the greatest horse people in the world. And you know many school teachers, many school children used to come to his ranch to visit it. One day, he was telling the story to a group of students, and saying believe in your dreams, and this is what happened to me, and so on. In the crowd, there was his teacher. She had brought a whole group of students back for a visit, not realising that he was the same boy. And she went up to him and said, 'You taught me a lesson. I am never going to steal the dreams of children again. I am going to ask them to believe in them.'

So keep your dream and let the children, who come into your care, nourish theirs.

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