



THE POWER OF KNOWLEDGE

Developing the Mental Faculty

“To give the student knowledge is necessary, but it is still more necessary to build up in him the power of knowledge.”¹

“The true basis of education is the study of the human mind, infant, adolescent and adult. Any system of education founded on theories of academic perfection, which ignores the instrument of study, is more likely to hamper and impair intellectual growth than to produce a perfect and perfectly equipped mind.”²



So often in our day to day life we feel handicapped just because we are not able to recall at the right moment something which we know, or find ourselves lost amidst facts and are unable to perceive and organise them. So often we confront the problem of decision making or face problems in making the right choice or an unbiased and correct judgment. We might wonder at the quality of our education that provides us only with a storehouse of facts to be remembered but as our skills and capacities remain undeveloped we are unable to remember or recall simple things of our day to day affairs!

We all know and repeat the fact that we use only 10% of our mind. Yet, while designing a class for students, the curriculum with administrators, the policies with educationists, we do not even consider the need to develop

the mental powers or to see the root of the problem. Instead, we perform intellectual somersaults on the surface and try to provide remedy packages - thus, the problem remains unsolved for ever. What are we diagnosing - the disease or the symptoms?!

I once heard of a teacher of young children who instructed them in independence, self- help, observation, reasoning, language - all through a simple act of asking them to bring to her the object that was round and soft and yellow instead of naming it. Simple things like asking questions to evoke a reasoned response or recalling something observed nebulously - these and other acts of the teacher can make the lesson more interesting, as well as help the students develop mental



qualities and skills. For instance, to train the power to retain and recall, we can phrase questions in a way where one may recall what one has experienced or understood rather than parrot out the text book. Especially with young children it can be done during an informal chat where they may recall what was the colour of the dress they wore last night, what they had for breakfast or when they woke up what their parents were doing. Memory is not only equivalent to the capacity to retain factual information as we understand from our own schooling experience, there is much more to it.

Today's challenges to the individual have made us better aware of our mental incapacities and are pushing us towards perfection. Thus we come across innumerable theories, articles, views, ideas dealing with the present crisis. Sometimes pills and panaceas of remedy measures too. But still a gap. Not commonly known, Indian Psychology deals with this subject in the deepest, widest and holistic manner.

"The instrument of the educationist is the mind or *antahkarana*, which consists of four layers. The reservoir of past mental impressions, the *citta* or storehouse of memory, which must be distinguished from the specific act of memory, is the foundation on which all the other layers stand. All experience lies within us as passive or potential memory; active memory selects and takes what it requires from that storehouse."³

"The passive memory or *citta* needs no training, it is automatic and naturally sufficient to its task; there is not the slightest object of knowledge coming within its field which is not secured, placed and faultlessly preserved in that admirable receptacle. It is the active memory, a higher but less perfectly developed function, which is in need of improvement."⁴ Thus, not trained properly it might blunder in its search, stumble on its way or collect irrelevant materials. Do we not experience this often?

"The second layer is the mind proper or *manas*, the sixth sense of our Indian Psychology, in which all the others are gathered up. The function of the mind is to receive the images of things translated into sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, the five senses and translate these again into thought sensations. It receives also images of its own direct grasping and forms them into mental impressions. These sensations and impressions are the material of thought, not thought itself; but it is exceedingly important that thought should work on sufficient and perfect material."⁵ Therefore, the importance of sensory training cannot be ignored. Physical nerves and their end organs - eye, ear, nose, tongue and skin - also need to be trained to be accurate and sensitive messengers of knowledge.

"The third layer is the intellect or *buddhi*, which is the real instrument of thought and that which orders and disposes of the knowledge acquired by the other parts of the machine."⁶ Any part of a machine, if not oiled properly, will not function properly. The organ of intellect needs to be challenged by analytic as well as synthetic activities. Thus will develop the powers of intellect, namely, judgment, observation, imagination, memory, reasoning, comparison.



“Every child is a lover of interesting narrative, a hero-worshipper and a patriot. Appeal to these qualities in him and through them let him master without knowing it the living and human parts of his nation’s history. Every child is an enquirer, an investigator, analyser, a merciless anatomist. Appeal to those qualities in him and let him acquire without knowing it the right temper and the necessary fundamental knowledge of the scientist. Every child has an insatiable intellectual curiosity and turn for metaphysical enquiry. Use it to draw him on slowly to an understanding of the world and himself. Every child has the gift of imitation and a touch of imaginative power. Use it to give him the groundwork of the faculty of the artist.”

Sri Aurobindo

The scope of each subject offers an opportunity to develop certain skills, along with faculties, that are unique to that discipline. For instance, Mathematics demands estimation and reasoning whereas Science requires observation, inference and logic and Languages develop expression, descriptive and aesthetic faculties. Each subject or content can become a tool for the individual to develop his or her own capacities and faculties. In this manner, the quality and capacity of mind can be developed through any subject with each student. We only need to effect a shift in ourselves from the content of subject to the content of mind.

Very often we will find that the reason we do not remember things is because we have not observed properly or paid enough attention and have just taken it in flashes. We don’t notice or notice very little. However, it does not require a separate lesson to develop the observation power - through subject-teaching itself it can be done. Models, structures, maps, flowers or even circumstances and events can be an occasion for one to draw, describe, present in precise detail. The same can help develop the memory as well.

Once the mind develops the habit of fixing itself on a particular object or concept, it can truly learn to know. Thus, observation is the first faculty to develop. In fact, most classroom problems are problems of inattentiveness which comes from disinterest. The more one is observant, the more is one involved and therefore concentrated and active. Lack of interest happens only when learning is not a natural self-education. Instead of lecturing about facts and giving second-hand conclusions which the students can very well observe, collect and arrive at themselves, we might do better to build up their reasoning and judgment through encouraging them to discover, compare, contrast, infer etc. The students can be asked to prove their statements twice - once, in favour of it and then, against it. This can help the mind to be supple and creative. It is only if we sharpen and strengthen the qualities of mind that we will be able to face the present challenges.

Education has to shift from information to faculty training, from subject content to the content of the mind, from quantity to quality, from imparting to discov-



ery. The daily addition of subjects to our curriculum - be it on moral and spiritual education or on management - will not be an answer for 'all round development' of an individual. In fact, it will make the mind passive. It will promote mechanical and unintelligent ways of learning that are unreal and far from one's spontaneous and self-motivated way of learning.

"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 and never to learn how to prepare tables and chairs and 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 and second-hand 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 and 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 and 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."⁷

"Most teachers want to have *good students*: students who are studious and attentive, who understand and know many things, who can answer well - good students. This spoils everything. The students begin to consult books, to study, to learn. Then they rely only on books, on what others say or write and they lose contact with the superconscient part which receives knowledge by intuition. This contact often exists in a small child but it is lost in the course of his education."⁸

There are many other higher capacities and qualities of mind that constitute the fourth layer which is not touched by our present education. The intuitive faculty, for example, is another inherent higher faculty that we have experienced at various occasions of our life, which needs to be tapped and developed.

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¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*, p.56

² Ibid, p.19

³ Ibid, p.23

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid, pp.23-24

⁶ Ibid, p.24

⁷ Ibid, pp.56-57

⁸ The Mother, *On Education*, p.169 (pocket edition)