

Eight Hundred Words on Education

By Ven. Kabir Saxena

The revivifying water of the monsoon rains currently drenching vast tracts of the subcontinent brings its own version of messy misery, adding yet more unspeakable desperation to an already intolerable situation. In Bodhgaya we've been spared the annual assault of the swollen south-flowing rivers originating in Nepal and points north, but our fellow Biharis north of the Ganga, just one hundred and fifty kilometers from here as the crow flies, have borne the brunt of flooding, hunger, fractured lives, the loss of precarious hope. It will add to the violence and fear, the kidnappings and the rapes, the banditry and sundry mayhem that constitute our very own special brand of the law of the jungle, for which this land, once the crucible of an advanced and dharmic civilization, is now sadly notorious.

Even a little reflection on the sorry state of affairs seems to suggest a poverty of consciousness, a profound disorder rooted in lack of a proper education, the right mental training. Please don't forget that we Indians have been conquered and ruled by what might be called colonizers for centuries. Sometimes we forget how to think and act intelligently for ourselves, for that has, for as long as we can remember, been the burden of another, superior person or race. And now that in all honesty we have only ourselves to blame for the Pandora's box of unresolved issues that still plague our country after sixty years of independence, we have to look inwards and see how we've betrayed the legacy of our ancient wisdom culture, which was firmly established in the soil of virtue, love, temperance and a mind that saw the interdependence at the heart of the process we call life. These moorings which stood us in good stead for so long are now painfully adrift as we rush madly headlong into aping a lifestyle, the shortcomings of which we little understand or even care to understand.

Our system of so-called education in India resembles the state of Russia's in the nineteenth century. Here's what Leo Tolstoy had to say: "...and so in the schools – which are built on the plan of prisons – questions, conversation and motion are prohibited – schools which are established from above and by force are not a shepherd for the flock, but a flock for the shepherd". Pupils in Bihar are often bullied, beaten, browbeaten into a

sullen but obedient submission. Is it then a wonder they grow up into selfish, amoral savages who don't think twice about cheating others (as they routinely do to foreigners in Bodhgaya), who don't have the mental wherewithal to analyze, assimilate, digest life's varied experiences, and unfold into the Buddhas they are in potential? The poet Rilke expresses this well:

"I want to unfold. I don't want to stay folded anywhere, because where I am folded, there I am a lie".

A lot of us are folded so tight that we're smelling like unwashed underwear in the monsoon humidity, exuding fetid sweat in the complacent snugness of our received images, ideas, preconceptions – in short, the tunnel vision we've perfected in our secure cocoons. Is not the true educator's task to help

the person unravel the cocoon, create a mandala where unfolding is happening naturally and joyfully? Might it be possible to help students actually follow their bliss *as well as engage in meaningful employment after school?*

Could we perhaps even help nurture the growth of a special kind of warrior who, in the sublime words of the

Dao De Jing, "*has no heart of his own. He makes the people's heart his own heart...*"?

M.K.Gandhi, still a beacon for atavistic nutters like me in these cynical times, says in his important book on Village Self-rule, "*As to the necessity and value of regarding the teaching of village handicrafts as the pivot and centre of education, I have no manner of doubt. The method [presently being] adopted in the institutions in India I do not call education, i.e., drawing out the best in man, but a debauchery of the mind*".

So where does that leave us? I have burdened you, patient reader, with a head-full of ideas that are driving me half insane, but I hope you will have begun to get a taste of the challenge we face in this corner of the planet, trying to integrate the virtuous with the useful. For myself, however, I'd better take the sobering advice of a contemporary sangha warrior, who says that when you open the door and invite in all sentient beings as your guests, you have to drop your agenda. And now the internalized Editor is screaming for me to stop. ☉

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