
UNIT 3 CONCEPTION OF EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To introduce the students to some key concepts of education as developed by Sri Aurobindo.
- To see the relationship between education and integral perfection (spirituality).
- To familiarize ourselves with some of the principles of education according to Sri Aurobindo.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

An explorer and adventurer in consciousness, a visionary of evolution, Sri Aurobindo has proposed a new world-view, which can be realised by proper education. This unit, heavily depending on an excellent article by Professor M.K. Raina (2000), attempts to situate his philosophy of education on his integral world-view. In his writings on education, Sri Aurobindo formulated a theory that could, with some variations, be adapted to all the nations of the world, fostering the growth of the integral consciousness in every pupil and bringing back to legitimate authority of the Spirit over a matter.

3.2 INTEGRAL PERFECTION AND EDUCATION

There are many ways of approaching Sri Aurobindo, but the light that one can gain from him, will depend upon the height and breadth of one's own quest. It is in raising most comprehensive questions in their profundity relating to the world and its future possibilities and the role that we are required to play as also how we should prepare ourselves to fulfil that role that we shall find the real relevance of Sri Aurobindo and find ourselves truly equipped to study him and the supramental consciousness that he has discovered and brought down on the earth (Raina 2000).

Three fundamental problems which gave direction to the spiritual quest and philosophical thinking and helped to fashion Sri Aurobindo’s major theories, relate to the paradox of the national life of India, the supposed conflict between spirituality and action, and the evolution of man. The search for solutions to these problems relates to the unique and creative tension in his own experience between spirituality and politics, both during his years of political activity and during his four decades of *sadhana* (spiritual discipline) at Pondicherry.

Aurobindo’s writings provide the needed force for action, realization and transformation which is reflected in his philosophy arrived at through inner experience. He wrote “in fact I was never satisfied till experience came and it was on this experience that later on I founded my philosophy”. His integral philosophy grew out of his Yoga—not the other way round. Two phrases that surge out of Sri Aurobindo’s writings that sum up his message are: “Integral perfection” and ‘spiritual religion of humanity”. His call for integrality and synthesis is most distinctively reflected in his statements: “We of the coming day stand at the head of a new age of development which must lead to such a new and larger synthesis. [...] We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future.” To attain integral perfection, Sri Aurobindo has found education to be very crucial.

3.3 INTEGRAL EDUCATION FOR THE GROWTH OF THE SOUL

Originally a poet and a politician, not a philosopher, Sri Aurobindo engaged himself for forty-five years out of his seventy-eight years in the practice of Yoga, and developed a philosophy of complete affirmation, affirming the reality of the world from the ultimate standpoint and the meaningfulness of socio-political action from the spiritual standpoint. He was sovereignly aware of the significance of variations in the concept of man, his life and destiny, of the nation and of humanity and the life of human race, which get reflected in the respective philosophies of education, and developed his scheme of integral education rooted in “the developing soul of India, to her future need, to the greatness of her coming self creation, to her eternal spirit.”

India, according to Sri Aurobindo (Ghose 1990), has seen always in man the individual a soul, a portion of the Divinity enwrapped in mind and body, a conscious manifestation in Nature of the universal self and spirit. In his educational philosophy, Sri Aurobindo upheld the basic but commonly forgotten principle that “it is the spirit, the living and vital issue that we have to do with, and there the question is not between modernism and antiquity, but between an imported civilisation and the greater possibilities of the Indian mind and nature, not between the present and the past, but between the present and the future”. In devising a true and living education, three things according to Sri Aurobindo—the man, the individual in his commonness and his uniqueness, the nation or people and universal humanity—should be taken into account.

Accordingly, Aurobindo conceived of education as an instrument for the real working of the spirit in the mind and body of the individual and the nation. He thought of education that for the individual will make its one central object the growth of the soul and its powers and possibilities, for the nation will keep first

in view the preservation, strengthening and enrichment of the nation—soul and its Dharma (virtue) and raise both into powers of the life and ascending mind and soul of humanity. And at no time will it lose sight of man’s highest object, the awakening and development of his spiritual being (Raina 2000). It is the concept underlying the true and living integral education.

Integrity of education is conceived as a process of organic growth, and the way in which various faculties could be developed and integrated is dependent upon each child’s inclination, rhythm of progression and law of development, *Swabhava* (inherent disposition) and *Swadharma* (inner nature). Integral education is not conceived as a juxtaposition of a number of subjects and even juxtaposition of varieties of faculties. The idea is to provide facilities for varieties of faculties, varieties of subjects and various combinations of pursuits of Knowledge, Power, Harmony and Skill in works. These faculties are so provided that they could be made use of by each student and the teacher so that a natural process of harmonious development could be encouraged (Raina 2000).

3.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PHYSICAL AND MORAL EDUCATION

Seeking to effect a synthesis of the East and the West in the contemporary philosophy of education, Sri Aurobindo insisted that a healthy body is a necessary condition for intellectual or spiritual attainment. For him physical education means not only the proper functioning of the various organs of the body but also the development of strength, balance, and a sense of beauty. According to him, beauty is the ideal which physical life has to realise. “If our seeking is for a total perfection of the being”, says Aurobindo, “the physical part of it cannot be left aside; for the body is the material basis, the body is the instrument which we have to use. [...] The perfection of the body, as great a perfection as we can bring about by means at our disposal” must be the ultimate aim of physical culture”. Therefore, “a development of the physical consciousness must always be a considerable part of our aim, but for that the right development of the body itself is an essential element; health, strength, fitness are the first needs, but the physical frame itself must be the best possible” (Raina 2000).

The education of the intellect, opines Aurobindo, divorced from the perfection of the moral and emotional nature, is injurious to human progress. He admits the difficulties involved in providing a suitable moral training for schools and colleges. He distinguishes the heart from the mind, and says, that to instruct the mind is not to instruct the heart. He senses the danger of moral textbooks being used for the purpose, in that they make the thinking of high things mechanical and artificial, and whatever is mechanical and artificial is inoperative for good. Further, he points out pertinently that ‘the attempt to make boys moral and religious by the teaching of moral and religious text-books is a vanity and a delusion, precisely because the heart is not the mind and to instruct the mind does not necessarily improve the heart.

The best kind of moral training that Sri Aurobindo conceives of is, “to habituate himself to the right emotions, the noblest associations, the best mental, emotional and physical habits and the following out in right action of the fundamental impulses of his essential nature”. By way of moral and religious education, any

attempt at imposition of a certain discipline on children, dressing them into a certain mould, lashing them into a desired path is essentially hypocritical and heartless. Only what the man admires and accepts, becomes part of himself; the rest is a mask. On the other hand, to neglect moral and religious education is to corrupt the race. In moral training, Sri Aurobindo stresses the value of suggestion and deprecates imposition. “The first rule of moral training”, he says, “is to suggest and invite, not command or impose. The best method of suggestion is by personal example, daily conversation and the books read from day to day” (Raina 2000).

“Every boy should”, says Aurobindo, “therefore be given practical opportunity as well as intellectual encouragement to develop all that is best in the nature. If he has bad qualities, bad habits, bad *samaskaras* (behaviour patterns), whether of mind or body, he should not be treated harshly as a delinquent, but encouraged to get rid of them by the *Rajayogic* (a type of yoga) method of *samyama* (self-control), rejection and substitution”. Instead of discouraging such people, Aurobindo would like them to be rather encouraged to think such bad traits, “not as sins or offences, but as symptoms of a curable disease, alterable by a steady and sustained effort of the will—falsehood being rejected [...] and replaced by truth, fear by courage, selfishness by sacrifice and renunciation, malice by love” (Raina 2000). So the bad traits must be positively transformed

No religious teaching, according to Aurobindo is of any value “unless it is lived, and the use of various kinds of *sadhana*, (spiritual self-training and exercise) is the only effective preparation for religious living. The ritual of prayer, homage, ceremony is carved for by many minds as an essential preparation and, if not made an end itself, is a great help to spiritual progress; if it is withheld, some other forms of meditation, devotion or religious duty must be put in its place. Otherwise, religious teaching is of little use and would almost be better ungiven” (Raina 2000).

3.5 THE PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING AND THE TRAINING OF THE SENSES

In a series of articles that Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1909–10, he enunciated three fundamental principles of teaching. He accepts the basic principle that nothing can be taught to the mind, which is not already concealed as potential knowledge in the unfolding soul of the creature. So also all perfecting of which the outer man is capable, is only a realizing of the eternal perfection of the Spirit within him. We know the Divine and become the Divine, because we are That already in our secret nature. All teaching is a revealing, all becoming is an unfolding. Self-attainment is the secret; self-knowledge and an increasing consciousness are the means and the process (Ghose 2003).

The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or taskmaster, he is a helper and a guide. His business is to suggest and not to impose. He does not actually train the pupil’s mind; he only shows him how to perfect his instruments of knowledge and helps and encourages him in the process. He does not impart knowledge to him; he shows him how to acquire knowledge for himself. He does not call forth the knowledge that is within; he only shows him where it lies and how it can be habituated to rise to

the surface. The distinction that reserves this principle for the teaching of adolescent and adult minds and denies its application to child is a conservative and unintelligent doctrine. Child or man, boy or girl, there is only one sound principle of good teaching (Ghose 2003). Difference of age only serves to diminish or increase the amount of help and guidance necessary; it does not change its nature.

The second principle is that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth. The idea of hammering the child into the shape desired by the parent or teacher is a barbarous and ignorant superstition. It is he himself who must be induced to expand in accordance with his own nature. There can be no greater error than for the parent to arrange beforehand that his son shall develop particular qualities, capacities, ideas, virtues, or be prepared for a prearranged career. To force the nature to abandon its own dharma is to do it permanent harm, mutilate its growth and deface its perfection. It is a selfish tyranny over a human soul and a wound to the nation, which loses the benefit of the best that a man could have given it and is forced to accept instead something imperfect and artificial, second-rate, perfunctory and common. Every one has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of perfection and strength in however small a sphere, which God offers him to take or refuse. The task is to find it, develop it and use it. The chief aim of education should be to help the growing soul to draw out that in itself, which is best, and make it perfect for a noble use (Ghose 2003).

The third principle of education is to work from the near to the far, from that which is to that which shall be. The basis of a man's nature is almost always, in addition to his soul's past, his heredity, his surroundings, his nationality, his country, the soil from which he draws sustenance, the air which he breathes, the sights, sounds, habits to which he is accustomed. They mould him not the less powerfully because insensibly, and from that then we must begin. We must not take up the nature by the roots from the earth in which it must grow or surround the mind with images and ideas of a life, which is alien to that in which it must physically move. If anything has to be brought in from outside, it must be offered, not forced on the mind. A free and natural growth is the condition of genuine development. There are souls, which naturally revolt from their surroundings and seem to belong to another age and clime. Let them be free to follow their bent; but the majority languish, become empty, become artificial, if artificially molded into an alien form. It is God's arrangement that they should belong to a particular nation, age, society, that they should be children of the past, possessors of the present, creators of the future. The past is our foundation, the present our material, the future our aim and summit.

Therefore, Aurobindo is very clear: "The wise teacher will not seek to impose himself or his opinions on the passive acceptance of the receptive mind; he will throw in only what is productive and sure as a seed, which will grow under the divine fostering within. He will seek to awaken much more than to instruct; he will aim at the growth of the faculties and the experiences by a natural process and free expansion. He will give a method as an aid, as a utilizable device, not as an imperative formula or a fixed routine. And he will be on his guard against any turning of the means into a limitation, against the mechanizing of process. His whole business is to awaken the divine light and set working the divine force" (Ghose 2003).

These principles, it will be observed, are subtle and complex, and no rigid formula of practice can be derived from them. They impose a great responsibility on the teacher and demand from him extraordinary qualities of a profound psychologist (Joshi, 1975). In the matter of the training of the senses, Aurobindo aims at nothing less than perfection. This, he says, must be one of the first cares of the teacher. The two important things that are needed of the senses, he points out are “accuracy and sensitiveness” (Raina 2000). The senses depend for their accuracy and sensitiveness on the unobstructed activity of the nerves which are the channels of their information and the passive acceptance of the mind, the recipient. In case of any obstruction, the remedy lies in the purification of the nerve system. “This process inevitably restores the perfect and unobstructed activity of the channels and, if well and thoroughly done, leads to a high activity of the senses. The process is called in yogic discipline *nadi-suddhi* or nerve – purification” (Aurobindo, 1990).

Six senses which minister to knowledge, sight, learning, smell, touch and taste, mind or *manas* (the sixth sense of the Indian psychology) can be developed through the physical nerves and their end—organs, but *manas* could be developed through yogic discipline *suksmadrsti* or subtle reception of images. Aurobindo wrote (Raina 2000): “Telepathy, clairvoyance, clairaudience, presentiment, thought-reading, character-reading and many other modern discoveries are very ancient powers of the mind which have been left undeveloped, and they all belong to the *manas*. The development of the sixth sense has never formed part of human training. In a future age it will undoubtedly take a place in the necessary preliminary training of the human instrument. Meanwhile there is no reason why the mind should not be trained to give a correct report to the intellect so that our thought may start with absolutely correct if not with full impressions.”

Sri Aurobindo while analysing the causes of inefficiency of the senses, as gatherers of knowledge, attributes it to ‘insufficient use’. Students, he suggests, should overcome tamasic (optuseness of the mind and the senses) inertia and ought to be accustomed to catch the sights, sounds, etc., around them, distinguish them, mark their nature, properties and sources and fix them in the *citta* so that they may be always ready to respond when called for by the memory. “Attention” according to him, is the chief factor in knowledge and considers it the first condition of right memory and accuracy. Besides attention “concentration on several things at a time” says Aurobindo is often indispensable. He holds the view that it is quite possible to develop the power of double concentration, triple concentration, multiple concentration, which is a matter of *abhyasa* or steady natural practice.

Along with faculties of memory, judgement, observation, comparing and contrasting and analogy which are indispensable aids in the acquisition of knowledge, Aurobindo emphasizes Imagination as the most important and indispensable instrument. It has been divided into three functions, the forming of mental images, the power of creating thoughts, images and imitations or new combinations of existing thoughts and images, the appreciation of the soul in things, beauty, charm, greatness, hidden suggestiveness, the emotion and spiritual life that pervades the world. “This is in every way as important as the training of the faculties which observe and compare outward things” (Raina 2000). These mental faculties, as Aurobindo suggests, should first be exercised on things, afterwards on words and ideas.... All this should be done informally, drawing on the curiosity and interest, avoiding set teaching and memorising of rules.

Sri Aurobindo is critical of the practice of teaching by snippets which is in practice in the existing system of education. Teaching by snippets, says Aurobindo, must be done away with. He is critical since: “A subject is taught a little at a time, in conjunction with a host of others, with the result that what might be well learnt in a single year is badly learned in seven and the boy goes out ill—equipped, served with imperfect parcels of knowledges, master of none of the great departments of human knowledge” (Raina 2000).

He characterizes such a system of education as one attempting to “heighten this practice of teaching by snippets at the bottom and the middle and suddenly change it to a grandiose specialism at the top. This is to base the triangle on its apex and hope that it will stand” (Raina 2000). Aurobindo has, therefore, found some meaning in the old system which was more rational than the modern: “If it did not impart so much varied information, it built up a deeper, nobler and much more real culture. Much of the shallowness, discursive lightness and fickle mutability of the average modern mind is due to the vicious principle of teaching by snippets”.

However, Aurobindo is clear that in the future education we need not bind ourselves either by the ancient or the modern system but select only the most perfect and rapid means of mastering knowledge. For him, “every child is an inquirer, an investigator, analyser, a merciless anatomist.” Appeal to these 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 enquiring. 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 ground work of the faculty of the artist (Raina 2000).

It is by allowing Nature to work that we get the benefit of the gifts she has bestowed on us Aurobindo is particular that the first attention of the teacher must be given to the medium and the instruments and, until these are perfected, to multiply subjects of regular instruction is to waste time and energy. “The mother tongue”, he says “is the proper medium of education and therefore the first energies of the child should be directed to the thorough mastering of the medium” (Raina 2000). In connection with language teaching he advocates that when the mental instruments are sufficiently developed to acquire a language easily and swiftly, that is the time to introduce him to many languages, not when he can partially understand what he is taught and masters it laboriously and imperfectly. He believes in the disciplinary value of learning one language, especially one’s own language, which he says, prepares one for mastering another. He maintains that with the facility developed in one’s own language, to master others is easier.

3.6 THE PSYCHIC AND SPIRITUAL EDUCATION

Aurobindo also speaks of mental and psychic education, but his real interest is in a still higher stage, which according to him is spiritual or supra-mental education. This does not imply the annihilation of the individual but his enrichment through contact with the Absolute. The spiritual stage transcends the mental and the psychic stage. The justification for psychic and spiritual education rests upon three important considerations (Raina 2000): a) education should

provide to the individual a steady exploration of something that is inmost in the psychological complexity of human consciousness; (b) the most important question of human life is to consider the aim of human life and the aim of one's own life and one's own position and the role in the society; and this question can best be answered only when the psychic and spiritual domains are explored and when one is enabled to develop psychic and spiritual faculties of knowledge; and (c) the contemporary crisis of humanity has arisen because of the disbalancement between the material advancement on the one hand and the inadequate spiritual progression on the other. (Ghose 1972a)

If, therefore, this crisis has to be met, development of psychic and spiritual consciousness should be fostered. Aurobindo tries to draw a distinction between psychic and spiritual in the following terms. At the level of psychic life, the individual feels an unbroken continuity in the world of forms and sees life as an immortal function in endless time and limitless space. The spiritual consciousness goes beyond time and space and is an identification with the infinite and the eternal. Aurobindo is expressing the same idea when he says that in psychic life selfishness must be discarded, but in the spiritual life there is no sense of the separate self. Aurobindo insists that it is not annihilation of the individual but its transformation which is the end of integral education. When man attains such education there is total transformation of matter. He calls it supramental education as it will work, not only upon the consciousness of individual beings, but upon the very substance of which they are built and even upon the physical environment in which they live (Raina 2000).

An unprecedented kind of experiment in education was launched by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, when in 1943, a school came to be established at Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry with merely 20 students on its rolls; soon it began to grow, and in 1951, when the number of students had increased, and studies in Higher Education had to be organized, it was expanded into Sri Aurobindo International University Centre. The Centre was conceived as one of the best means of preparing humanity for future that would be marked by the manifestation of a new light and power—the supra-mental light and power. It was launched so that the elite of the humanity may be made ready who would be able to work for the progressive unification of the race and who at the same time would be prepared to embody the new force descending upon the earth to transform it. The Centre conducted a programme of experimental research under the direct guidance of the Mother, and it became a laboratory of education for tomorrow.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does Aurobindo understand ‘education?’

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2) Give a detailed account of Aurobindo’s educational philosophy.
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3.7 LET US SUM UP

The educational doctrine of Sri Aurobindo is closely linked with his futuristic vision of human destiny which is reflected in his statement: They should be children of the past, possessors of the present, creators of the future. The past is our foundation, the present our material, the future our aim and summit. Aurobindo’s visionary mystic mind articulated a concept of life which was unique since he conceived of it as a lavish and manifold opportunity given us to discover, realize, express the Divine and accordingly, visualized a system of education which would help expression of unrealized potentialities, in line with his concept of life. This called for a creative vision and an extraordinary adventure. For him human destiny is an ascent towards the supermind, towards realization of the Godhead and his philosophy of education provides a forceful and resilient framework to attain this goal (Raina 2000).

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