

Education & Ethics

N Kazanas, Omilos Meleton, Athens: June 2003.

One of the first sayings *subhāṣitas* that I learnt when I was studying Sanskrit was that for the wise man *Vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* ‘the whole world is my family’. This is very similar to the ancient Greek saying *andrōn epiphanōn pása gē táphos* ‘for distinguished men the whole earth is their grave’: in other words, a distinguished man need not die and be buried in his own country because his own country is really the whole world.

These sayings are for men of wisdom and distinction. And I am sure there are similar ones in all cultures. But for common men, even for a philosopher like Aristotle, mankind was divided: there were the superior civilized Greeks and the inferior foreigners, who had no Greek language and culture and their speech was *bar-bar* and so they were “barbarian”. In Ancient India too there were the Āryas, the noble twice born and the *barbaras* or *mlecchas*. Both Greeks and Indians exhibited an astonishing degree of toleration: they accepted foreigners and their religious beliefs. The Hindus were ever ready to recognize in other religions their own deities and beliefs: thus Greek Dionysos was for them Shiva and Pallas Athene was Sarasvatī and Durgā; and so on (Diodoros Sikeliotis). The Greeks were no different. They accepted fully the Egyptian and other Near Eastern gods recognizing similarities with their own, even from Minoan times (i.e. 1500 BC); in Hellenistic times (i.e. 300 BC on) many temples for foreign deities appeared in the Greek world (even S. Italy). The Romans were just as tolerant: the worship of Egyptian Isis or of Persian Mithras was widespread: Mithraism reached even the Roman colonies of Britain. The persecution of Christians was political, not really religious.

But at all times there was this division between “us civilized people” and the foreign barbarians. Aristotle disagreed with his former pupil Alexander who, as the great conqueror that he became, allowed the foreign nations to maintain their own culture and encouraged intermarriages between Greeks and natives.

The two tendencies, toleration and prejudice, continue today and our world is broken up into many and diverse fragments, often inimical and warring. In addition, today, as in ancient times, we find that ambition and economic greed flare up seeking predominance and causing conflicts and bloodshed. It is not just businessmen or Trade Unions that seek more income and wealth; everybody suffers from it. I often catch my mind dreaming wistfully of more income and indulging in designs to achieve this. A very wealthy student of mine confessed that he wanted more and more. It is like a bug that won’t let one rest even if one has more wealth than one knows. Then, ambition does not afflict only politicians, as far as I can see. Everybody seems to want to have some sort of power and control over others – husbands over their wives, wives over their husbands, even young students over their teachers. In the world of sport one can’t fail to notice how contestants brandish their clenched fist when they win a point or exclaim angrily when they lose a point. Unfortunately, there is hardly any nobility of spirit: it is all about making money and being a famous star.

Obviously, we are not wise. Even we, scholars, are not necessarily such, according to Democritus, that ancient Greek physicist, the first “atomist”; he said “Many erudite men have no intelligence” (Fr 64). In fact, slander and back-knifing are common features of the academic world today. Thus we accept easily enough foreigners and their religion and culture. But when our own country or culture (its customs and traditions) get criticized; when our own economic interests are threatened; when our ambitions or desires get frustrated; when our own real or imagined importance is doubted – then our equanimity collapses. Our tolerance is thin and brittle. Christianity provides another case in point. Christ taught that one should love one’s neighbour as oneself, that one should not do to others what one does not want others to do to oneself and that if hit on one cheek one should turn the other also. But I don’t know of any Christians – including myself – who behave like this. How may we be able to behave like this?

Surely, education should aim at this. All our virtues are vulnerable and fragile. Scientific enquiry, technology and professional grooming certainly advance very rapidly. But then so does criminality and

naked violence – ugly terrorism, psychotic killings, murderous drugs, child abuse, smuggling, robbing and all kinds of exploitation of man by man and, of course, the paranoid pollution of the environment. Fraud and crime operate also on a large scale, world-wide, under a thin veneer of legality. Then, the necessity for visas is yet another bothersome instance of the divisions and complications in our world, despite advances in communications, globalisation and the like.

I think there is something seriously amiss with all our education systems. They certainly produce competent scientists, technicians, artists, managers and the like; but do they produce “good” human beings? – honest, truthful, not given to rage and violence, or to fear, anxiety, panic and depression? Millions in the West live on sleeping pills and anti-depressants; millions are in prison.

The development of good character, of a good citizen and a good healthy human being was the work of Ethics. Today education is geared towards the sciences and professions and this is as it should be. This will certainly produce competent scholars, scientists, physicians, lawyers, computer-programmers, financiers and what not. But these are not necessarily good citizens – honest, truthful and healthy, unshaken in adversity or success, caring for others. Ethics is confined to publications in libraries and to academic discussions.

In the old days the son learnt his profession from his father – medicine, trade, sculpture, woodwork or whatever. The daughter would marry and her husband would take care of her. Education consisted in fashioning good character, ‘a healthy mind in a healthy body’. And this was accomplished by sound ethical training with emphasis on doing one’s duties. This was so in Ancient Greece and India and China. Population has increased enormously now and ideas and social conditions have changed considerably. But are these changes so radical as to render the effective teaching of Ethics unnecessary?

In India the ethical teaching was encapsulated in 5 simple precepts or duties: *ahimsā* ‘non-violence’, *satya* ‘truth’, *asteya* ‘non-stealing’, *brahmacarya* ‘continence or purity’ and *aparigraha* ‘frugality or non-amassment of goods’ (*Yoga-sūtra* II, 30). In other words one does nothing that would harm others; one speaks the truth; one does not take what is not one’s own; one keeps things pure – one’s own relations, the goods one offers, one’s motives and values; finally one does not amass more goods than one needs. Similar injunctions are found in Islam since it accepted Moses’s and Christ’s teachings, in Ancient Egypt and Greece. Plato for instance taught that one should seek the truth, above all else, give to everyone what is their due and so observe one’s duty and be just (*Republic* 331E, 433B). Not surprisingly, the same injunctions are found in the Mosaic Code of the Jews. Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not bear false witness; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not commit adultery (and not just in sexual relations as is usually taken); thou shalt not covet (what others have).

Moses’s injunction ‘Thou shalt not covet’ is the last of the famous 10 Commandments and goes to the heart of the matter. Because, as is well known, this coveting, i.e. selfish desire, is the root of all problems. And so all ancient teachings directed attention and effort towards its restraint. The Egyptian sage Ptah-hotep advised (sometime before 2000 BC) “to be free from evil... you should not be covetous”. Because this desire makes us all ignore the natural measures and laws of the universe so as to gain some advantage for ourselves or our people – political power, ownership of land, control of the media, etc.

The Vedic Tradition recognises two types of desire. Ādi Śaṅkara, that great spiritual leader who re-established the ancient Vedic vision, said “It is the wind of desire that brings the dark cloud of ignorance; but it is also the wind of desire that will help disperse it under the light of knowledge.” Desire, according to another ancient Vedic text the *Nāsadīya Sūkta*, the Hymn of Creation (*RV* X, 129), is the first seed of mind and thus immensely powerful: it directs and shapes our actions. So the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* teaches *mā gṛdhaḥ* ‘do not covet’! And the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* says: “fools follow desires and get entrapped in the widespread net of death; but the wise who have tasted of immortality do not search for the permanent among things impermanent” (*KU* II, 1, 2). These wise men turn in the opposite direction desiring the Immutable.

Are the Upanishads wrong? Is Śaṅkara wrong? Some will say ‘yes’, some ‘no’ and others ‘I don’t know’.

In the West, in Greece, Plato taught much the same. There are excessive and unnecessary desires for many varieties of foods [beverages, clothes etc] that lead men and society to worsening conditions and finally to perdition (*Republic* 559Dff); but also honourable καλή and good ἀγαθή desires (*Rep* 561C) which lead to a temperate, wise and healthy way of life and spiritual excellence ἀρετή (*Laws* 732E). After all, ‘love of wisdom’ *philosophia* is one such noble desire. Aristotle follows his former Master and, in establishing the “*mean*” μεσότης of virtues, moral and intellectual, says much the same. But Plato gives also the graceful image of the soul as a chariot with reason as the charioteer, the good desires as the white, obedient horse and the excessive desires and habits as the dark, unruly horse that drags the whole soul to the lower material level of existence (*Phaidros* 246ff). In the far East, the Chinese sage Lao Tse taught “Lessen selfishness and desires” (*Tao Te Ching* 19).

Are Lao Tse, Plato and Aristotle also wrong? – and so many other thinkers both in the East and West?...

The Indic *Kātha Up* also uses the image of the chariot (I, 3, 3ff). This has more details than Plato, and includes the *rathin* ‘the Master of the chariot’ who is the supreme Self *ātman*. But here too the driver *sārathi* is the key figure and represents *buddhi*, reason or higher intellect, endowed with knowledge and discrimination. In both images, if the charioteer is strong and steady, the journey will be smooth and in the right direction – otherwise, no! Desires must come under the regulation of Reason.

With Plato education should aim precisely at strengthening the driver. For the Athenian philosopher, education should start as early as possible. Parents must want it and cooperate. It did not consist in putting knowledge or information into the mind but rather in bringing out man’s innate power and knowledge (*Rep* 518C). For him, as for Aristotle (despite the latter’s many disagreements and differences on other issues), education was avoiding vice and practising virtue, but also a *katharsis*, a purification, which frees the soul from the throng of desires that bind man to petty and gross material pursuits. Learning is only recollection (*Phaidon* 72E) since the soul ψυχή or rational mind νοῦς has all necessary knowledge. And Lao Tse says in the same vein: “One can know the whole world without going out of one’s door. One can see the way of heaven without looking out of the window. The further one runs after learning, the less one knows” (*Tao* 47). According to Lao Tze too, all true knowledge is in one’s nature.

This idea was very powerful in antiquity and is glaring at us in the very word “education” and its cognates. This word comes from Latin *educare* or *educere* both of which mean “to draw out” or “lead/bring out” (*ex-duc-*). What is drawn out is the innate knowledge.

In the Vedic Tradition education sought at a preliminary stage to restrain desires, to encourage virtuous conduct in liberality, non-injury, abstention from wicked deeds, endurance and detachment and, of course, adherence to one’s duties *dharma* as an individual, as a member of family, a member of society, a human being and a citizen of the universe (5 aspects). Thus the *buddhi* was strengthened to move out of the individual circle *vyaṣṭi*, where one’s ego was the only reference point; then it expanded out of the family circle *kula* where only one’s kith and kin mattered; next it expanded out of the *jāti*, the tribe or society, (where one lived and worked), into the greater circle of the world *loka*; finally it opened out into the *samaṣṭi* the entire universe. (Again, the 5 aspects.)

Clearly only a mind which encompasses at least the fourth stage of the expanding *buddhi*, the circle *loka* i.e. the whole mankind, can be truly tolerant. Truly wise would be the mind that comprehends the *samaṣṭi* for only then it would know the real first Cause(s). And knowledge of the *samaṣṭi* is within man’s nature, according to the ancient Masters.

Aristotle, again, writes that while political and military preoccupations are most important, the mind’s superior activity is meditative, contemplating and resting with the First Cause(s). Therefore being men and mortal, we must not think only of human and perishable things but must strive to be like the immortals

living with the best and highest aspect of our nature which is Reason. If we don't live in accordance with Reason, we don't live as human beings but as other creatures – plants or animals (*Ethics* 1177b 15ff). For him freedom is not doing what one likes: this corrupts the individual and society (*Politics* 1301b29).

How did the Upanishadic and the Platonic students develop buddhi? How are good ideas and principles translated into sustained, fruitful practice? Normal teaching is obviously necessary; so also the presence of people with steady, good character, since children learn more easily by imitation. More important, special energy is required; otherwise everybody would easily be able to accomplish this transformation. The practice we meet in the Vedic Tradition (Yoga and Vedānta) and in Buddhism is a form of meditation that provides a finer energy, not normally available to people. The Socratic circle had a similar practice as did other schools before them: it is now called “incubation” and through this the soul or mind withdrew from the senses and their objects and rested in the realm of ἡσυχία ‘quietude’ or the Unchanging, the ὄν ἀεί, which is one's true nature. This is not difficult but it requires regular disciplined practice – if the energy is to come from the silent depths or heights of the mind. Just talking or thinking about it, will not do it.

Here I had better become silent also. I have said enough.

The Greek natural philosopher Thales used to say that the most difficult thing is to know oneself. When asked what was the easiest thing, he replied “To give advice to others”. I think we recognize readily both. So I am not making recommendations. I am rather putting questions and observations from my experience as one who has taught for some 40 years all ages from 5 to 50 and diverse subjects like Philosophy, Economics, comparative studies in Western and Eastern cultures, modern and ancient languages and even the practice of Meditation. Advice should come from someone wiser than myself.