

A Study on Timeless Glory of The Teacher as Depicted in Taittiriyaopaniṣat

Dr S. Ramadevi

Reader in Sanskrit

Sri Ramachandra Arts science college,
Tilaknagar, Hyderabad.

They have no respect for their teachers. They are not earnest about their academic pursuits. They have no sense of discipline. These, and some more in the same strain are comments not about the students of present-day colleges and universities by some grumbling old professor. They are the comments of Plato about the students of his times. If this was what could be said of students of no less a teacher than Plato of his student's more than two millennia ago, do we have reason to complain about the state of education in our times?

From the distant west, to return to our own remote East, we can see a similar situation. Our Vedic teacher, if not in anguish about his students as Plato was, does seem to feel the need for a prayer for blemish less and better behaved and more motivated students in his classes. These are the prayers of the rishi of the Taittiriyaopaniṣad: "Damâyantu brahmachâriḥ swâha, Eamâyantu brahmachâriḥ swaha" (1-4.). The Vedic teacher found it necessary to pray for students who are self-controlled and calm. The English equivalent brahmachârin is 'bachelor', as in B. A. (Bachelor of Arts), B. Sc and B. com. Both the terms stress the celibacy as a desirable condition for the pursuit of studies. Celibacy, self-control in all aspects of one's behaviour, and calm and a serene disposition are what a teacher prayed for in his students in ancient times. We pray, should be praying, for such qualities today too. There can be no change in our prayer. Because human nature remains the same in all times.

Let us turn now from the student to the teacher and his institute. Today, we try our utmost to attract the students to our institutes. There are huge full-page ads in the major dailies attracting students from all corners to come and study in our institutes. No doubt, it is carried absurd limits of cross Commercial Competition. But the practice of praying for the students from all corners to come in full numbers and join the college is neither modern nor mean. In the same hymn of Taittiriyaopaniṣad, we find the teacher-rishi praying for students to come to his centre learning in large numbers from all corners. There were no national dailies and no T. V. channels in those days. They could only pray to God to send students to them. "Amâyantu brahmchâriḥ swâha. Pramâyantu brahmchâriḥ swâha. Vi mâyantu brahmchâriḥ swâha" (1.4). (May they come to me from far off and different directions? May they come in large numbers!). Only a crank would subscribe to Stephen Leacock's idea of a quiet college with a library where you read last week's newspaper and a clock that does not necessarily work. Leacock thinks that a college does not need students. It is the students who need a college function effectively when there are sufficient funds for its running. A teacher in those times was an institute by himself. And he cannot live at a subsistence level and teach. Nor can he run his centre on nothing. He has to maintain himself at a sufficiently respectable level, so that others in the society do not look down upon his social standing. (Yaco janeûânih swâha, Ereyân vasyasânih swaha)-" May I become renowned among men, May I become superior to those who are wealthier than ordinary people" (1-4). He also had to feed and provide for the needs of his students. He was the social welfare minister, the principal and the warden. For all this, he needed grants.

(âvahanti vitanvâna, kurvâòâ ciramâtmanah, vâsâmsi mama gâvâœech, annapâne cha sarvadâ, tato me ceriyamâvaha lomacam pacubhîh saha swâha...yâœojanesânîh swâha, œereyân vasyasânîh swâha)- "Bring to me the goddess of prosperity, the maker, the bringer and increaser of wealth, without delay, of clothes, cattle, furry animals, food, and drink for ever". (1-4). Let us note the words, without delay'. No red tape in the government's release of grants or students' scholarships or teachers' salaries. There were then no self-financing educational courses. An educational institution has a right to grants, royal or corporate. Education is a social responsibility. King Janaka offered a thousand cows (Sahasram dadâmi) to Yajnavalkya for his teachings. (Brihadaranyakopanihad. 4-3-33).

Certain basic things remain the same, over millennia and across continents. Or, as some management guru has said, (and they are real guru-s of modern age) the more the things change, the more they remain the same. The basics are basically unchanging, whether in ancient Greece of Plato or the modern U. S. of Harvard and Stanford, whether in the India of Vedic rishis or the recent institutions like the I. I. Ts and the I. I. Ms. The ancient is often romanticized and we construct a picture of golden glorious past and compare it with the degenerate present. The ancient is better looked up to as an ideal to aspire for rather than as a reality to be revived replicated.

It is not a question of how much we have lost the ancient glory. It is a question of how far we have fallen from the ideal. For, there is always a shadow that falls between the ideal and the real. This estimation of the gap may be more purposeful and fruitful for the teacher to regain his glory, a glory which he has to regain ceaselessly, for, himself, for his students and for the institutions of leaning.

In order to estimate how far the present teacher has fallen from the ideal, we should first be clear about what our ideals should be, and how high we set our personal standards. But, first, let us find him in the scene of his fall. And when the teacher falls, he does not fall alone. He pulls with him the whole educational structure.

The scene of higher education in India is very depressing indeed. What is more depressing is that it does not disturb the characteristically indifferent Indian society. As in every field of life, everyone wants to grab what one can in this scene of academic mayhem, as people, quite respectable people, are seen doing. When there is arson and vandalism in the streets for some reason or other, people join the loot. The same thing is happening in the scene of academic vandalism. You condemn it loudly and join the loot and get away with what you can. There are a few teachers with high moral stature who can stand up and resist non-academic recommendations, politicians' pressure and student defiance. A teacher's stature is defined by academic competence, professional commitment and integrity of character. But the situations in the modern times, making teachers fail in all these counts. And regarding commitment and integrity the less said the safer.

As to the organization of the educational system, unlike in the west, there are no checks and counterchecks. In the west, there are loopholes. But they are plugged when they are detected. In India, nothing needs to be detected. Our system is quite transparent. There is hardly a university department, hardly an institute of higher learning whose head is held in unquestioning regard. We may have to pray in vain, along with Ravindranath Tagore: "where the mind is free the head held high....." where? Where is the head Tagore prayed for? Who is to blame for this state of our higher education? Some blame the individual and some the system. Gandhiji believed it is futile to attempt to invent a system that automatically makes men perfect. However, it is a vicious cycle in which the corrupt system corrupts the individual and corrupt individual corrodes the system.

Let us get back to our theme of bridging the gap between the ideal and the real and to restore some dignity, if not the glory, to the teacher.

But we have left out the thing in our discussion so far. As we talking about the teacher of worldly skills or about those ancient rishis, the teacher of brahma vidya? For, that is a very important distinction, the distinction between para and apara viidya. And are we sure that we are talking of the glory of the spiritual teacher? Or do we want to believe that no such distinction is tenable in a technological age and when we sing of the guru as in "gururbrahmâ gururvishnuh gururdevo maheshvarah, guruh sâkshât param brahma tasmai Sri Gurave namah". We are saluting every teaches of every craft and every teacher of every type of cunning? It would be hypocrisy to put on same pedestal the teacher of brahma vidya and the teacher of the art of auditing and accounting.

What is the glory of the teacher of highest learning? Let us turn to the Santimantra of Kathopanishad which is even today sung daily in many schools before the day's teaching starts. And it is also a very popular mantra:

"Om Sahanâvavatu, sa nau bhunaktu, saha vîryam karavâvahai, tejasvinâvadhîtamastu, mâ vidvisâvahai, om shântih shântih shantihshântih" ('May he protect us both, may he nourish us both, may we both work together with great energy, may our study be thorough and fruitful, may we never hate each other').

This peace invocation is particularly Puzzling. Puzzling because there is in it a total identification of the guru and the sishya. There are no two prayers, one for the teacher and the other for the student. They are both on the same level. Or, are they? If they are not on the same level, and we have every reason to assume that a realized teacher and the student who seeks enlightenment from the teacher are not on the same level - What does this common prayer signify? It is true that the teacher and the student are on different planes and probably at the two ends of the path. What is of immense significance is that the teacher comes down from his high state to the level of the student and joins him in his prayer. This total unreserved identification with the student who is starting on his educational path is the point of the highest importance for the success of the learning process. Unless the teacher forgets his high stature and comes down to the level of the student in a spirit of understanding and in total love, there can be no learning

'May he protect us both?'

Both the teacher and the student need protection. However, the protection needed is not the same for both. What kind of protection does the student need? The student needs to be protected from his ego. Some times he may think that his teacher is after all no as great as he is made out to be and that he may even be superior to his guru. He needs to be protected from his arrogance towards his teacher. He may think that he knows better than his teacher. Moreover, the student imagines that the teacher is jealous of his knowledge. The student needs to be protected all these egoistic, ignorant arrogance because they are the hurdles in the path of education. And what is the protection the teacher requires? The teacher does not protect himself because he has totally lost his ego and has no identity with any "I" that needs to be protected. It is for God and for the student to protect him. The teacher never protects or defends himself against the attacks on his name, fame and happiness. He doesn't guard himself against intellectual disobedience, social contempt. The teacher needs protection from the student constantly. Because it is the student whose interests and inclinations come in to conflict with his teacher's purpose of enlightening the student. He prays for the strength to fulfil his dreadful mission of hitting at, striking at, and blowing off of the hardest fetters of the student's ignorance. He has to strike with a seeming mercilessness. And to hit hardest he needs strength. For, he is the thunder and the lightening to the student. The thunder however proceeds the lightening.

"May He nourish us both?"

Nourishment for both the spiritual enlightenment. The teacher is nourished by giving his knowledge, and because he does not hoard it. What you give nourishes. If the teacher keeps his knowledge to himself without sharing it with his student out of jealousy, he is not nourished.

"May we work together with great energy?"

The teacher and the student combine all their resources and potentials and become joyous travellers in the journey to the spiritual goal. The resources of teacher are his humility in coming down to the level of the student, his infinite patience, his self-forgetfulness, indifference to his status and merits, his tolerance of the of the student's total repeated rejection of his instructions. The student's resources are of acceptance the teacher and his sincerity. Most often there is bound to be conflict between the teacher and the student because in the student there is a conflict between his desire to loose his ego and his desire to strengthen it simultaneously. And the teacher continues relentlessly to destroy the student's ego.

"May the knowledge illuminate us both?"

The knowledge learnt by the teacher and student should take them both towards impregnable humility, forgiveness, magnanimity and identification. The excellent spiritual power of the teacher lies in his descending to the level of the student and makes him rise up to the standards of gaining supreme knowledge. The Vedic teacher along with his students says "Tejasvi bhuyasam, Varchasvi bhuyasam, Brahmavarchasvi bhuyasam". The teacher and student wish to have impregnable intellectual unity that transforms itself into actions without any emotional impediments.

"May we not hate each other"?

There is found to be hatred in the student because of his emotional nature, ever seeking support of his egoistic tendencies. The teacher knows about this inevitable conflict and is prepared for the student's competition with him and becoming hostile and hateful towards him. Hence this prayer not to hate each other. The teacher is truly defenseless and willingly exposes himself to the hatred of not only his student but of the world. That is the ideal of a teacher in the highest sense. A teacher's is the supreme example of self-sacrifice in the yajna of education. He commences teaching after sacrificing his self, after losing his ego without a trace.

This is the glory of the teacher. It is neither ancient nor modern. It is timeless.

How far can we reach in our aspiration to revive that glory? It is a question which every teacher has to ask and answer for him.

References:

1. Chandogyopanishd (with the commentary of Sankara), Advaita Asrama, Calcutta.
2. Kathopanishad Aparna publications, Karnal, Haryana
3. Mundakopanishad Advaita Asrama, Calcutta-14
4. Taittiriyanishad Ramakrishna math, Chennai-4
5. The Eight Upanishads Advaita Asrama, Calcutta-14
6. The Intellectual's obligation of Society, an Article by Prof. S. Radha Krishna Murthy. (The Graduate, Hyderabad, Annual Number, August, 1968).