

Chapter V

Education for Women

Education is necessary for both men and women. But education for women has to be in accordance with their special needs. Educated women are really the promoters of *dharma* for the whole world. Parents must also cooperate in equipping women with proper education. Women should not be given freedom in certain matters. I will not approve of their being given such freedom. They must be made into ideal women; their education must be so shaped.

Unbridled freedom is destructive of *dharma*, and it also harms the woman herself. Mixing in society without any discrimination produces ruinous results. Of course there were educated women in the past, but they never gave up their *dharma*, they never forgot the goal of *Atmic dharma*. Education (*vidya*) must be built on the basis of discrimination (*viveka*). Sulabha, Savithri, Anasuya, Gargi, Nalayani, and other such models of chastity, devotees of the Lord like

Meera, *yoginis* like Chudala, all were born in this country of God (*Bharathadesa*) and strengthened *dharma* by their adherence to it. Once, when Sulabha was discoursing on the *Atma* with all her scholarship and experience, even Janaka was astounded! It is through the example of such great and holy women, with their character and conduct inspired by devotion and spiritual wisdom, that even today simplicity, humility, and devotion shine in the hearts of the women of this country of God.

Today, women should draw inspiration from them; efforts must be made to live as they did in the past. The *Hindu* woman must always have before her as her guide the ideal of *dharma* and progress in spiritual discipline. She can master any subject related to the objective world that is prominent today, but the welfare of the spirit should not be forgotten; she must get interested in *Vedantic* study, which cultivates the inner vision. A woman without this training is a rock without support, a danger to herself and others, a very unbalanced individual. Sulabha and others who pursued such studies became expounders of Brahman (*Brahmavadins*) of great fame. India produced several such female saints and scholars. Learned scholars (*pundits*) and wise persons (*vidwans*) used to approach such women for inspiration and guidance.

Progress is based on proper education for women

On what is progress based? The progress of the nation, the community, and the family depends on the proper

education of women. The country can be lifted to its pristine greatness only through women mastering the science of realization of the Reality (*Atma-vidya*). If the nation is to have lasting prosperity and peace, women have to be trained through an educational system that emphasizes moral conduct and moral qualities. The cause for the present fall in moral standards and absence of social peace is the neglect of this aspect of women's education. The earth and sky are still the same; the change is in the ideal of education, from *dharma* to *a-dharma*.

The education of today is spoken of as *vidya*, but that is merely a way of calling it. It doesn't deserve that name, if you consider the present actions of the educated and their personality traits. The educated person must be capable of imbibing the inner joy of the *Atma*, regardless of external circumstances; that person must have grasped the purpose of existence and must be aware of the discipline of realization. In the old days, the grace of the Lord was the diploma that every student sought to secure. That diploma was awarded to those who were proficient in the cultivation of morality, the knowledge of the *Atma*, sublimation of instincts, good conduct, pure habits, control of the senses, restraint of the mind, and development of divine qualities. Today, however, things are different. Diplomas can now be gained by mugging up a few books! One cannot acquire moral and spiritual training through modern schooling.

Every woman must be given education in a wellplanned manner. She must be able to understand the problems of the country. She must render such service and help as she can, within the limits of her resources and capacity, to the country, community, and family. No nation can be built except on the culture of its women. The coming generation is shaped by the mothers of today; this generation is so full of *a-dharma* and injustice because their mothers were not vigilant and intelligent enough. Well, what is past is past. To save at least the next generation, women have to be warned in time and guided to take the ancients as their model.

Past, present, or future, for all time, women are the backbone of progress, the heart of the nation, the very breath. They play the chief role in the *dharma* of life here below, a key role that is charged with holiness. The woman's mission is to lay down the canons of rightness and morality. She must provide children with moral and spiritual training. When the mother is imbued with *dharma*, the children get the benefit and get similarly saturated. When she is skilled in morals, the children learn to be moral. Therefore, the level of education among women decides whether a country is to prosper or decline. Her acts and conduct are crucial factors.

The responsibility of the elders and the parents is very great in this. Take the students of today. No trace of culture can be seen in them; matters of the spirit and talk of the *Atma* raise laughter among them! A mastery of words, a

servitude to tailoring , these have become the fashion. This is not genuine culture. The educated women of today are helpless when it comes to managing a home. Home to them is but a hotel, they are so helplessly dependent on the cook and the maid. The educated woman is but a painted doll, decorating the modern home; she is a handicap to the husband, a weight around his neck. He is squeezed by her insistent demands for spending money on all kinds of objects. She does not share in the tasks of housekeeping, so by sheer idleness, eating, and sleeping without exercise, she develops illness that leads her quickly to death.

The wanton behaviour of women has enveloped the world of today in an atmosphere of declining *dharma*. Women are harming themselves by running after fleeting pleasure, disregarding the need to develop good character and elevating qualities. They are enamoured of pseudofreedom, which feeds their conceit. To get fixed up in a job, to earn degrees, to move about with all and sundry without distinction and discrimination, to discard respect for elders and give up fear of sin and evil, to overlook the claims of the good and the holy, to force the husband to dance to one's tune, to deny the tribute of repentance to one's errors —are these the signs of education? No; they are all the monstrous shapes of uneducation (*a-vidya*), the uneducated egotistical attitudes that make a person ugly and repelling.

If the wife feels that the husband's home is sacred, then that home itself will endow her with every skill and qualification. There is no place anywhere that excels such a home for her. One saintly poet sang that the home is her temple, her school, her playground, her political arena, her field of sacrifice, her hermitage.

Study and society not harmful in themselves

Educated women can do useful service to the community around them according to their skill, taste, inclination, desire, character, educational status, mode of living, discipline, or scholarship. But they should avoid tarnishing the reputation of their parents, their family, or themselves. A woman without a good character is as bad as "dead"; so, women must be ever vigilant when they move about in the world. They should avoid flippant talk or free mixing. The discriminating woman will engage only in acts that will add to the lustre of her husband's fame and honour, never an act that will tarnish it. That is why it is said that "virtue (*sadguna*) is the sign of the educated person, the thing that makes education worthwhile."

I do not declare that women should not be educated or should not move in society. Wherever they move, if they are endowed with good qualities and if the good qualities are accompanied by good actions, good habits, and adherence to the eternal (*sanathana*) *dharma* and spiritual discipline (*sadhana*), then their study is really worthwhile and society

is indeed benefited. Study and society are not harmful in themselves; they react with the nature of the people who make use of them and yield good or bad results. The cat holds the kitten as well as the rat in the selfsame mouth, but with what a difference! The kitten, it fondles; the rat, it kills. The bite is neutral, it is the rat or kitten that decides how it behaves.

So too, knowledge can develop discrimination, inspire the springs of service, prompt inquiry into the Reality, promote the search for the Absolute, and even pave the way for becoming a sage (*paramahansa*). On the other hand, it might feed and strengthen the roots of falsehood, hypocrisy, cruelty, and injustice; it might teach people newer means of deceit and ruin the career of people on earth. It might turn love into poisonous hatred and truth into a bone of contention.

Adhere to the dictates of *dharma*

Therefore, whatever subject a woman might have studied and mastered, whatever the degree she has won, whatever the status of her husband or of herself, she must hold fast to these truths: real charm consists in good character; morality is the very breath of woman; modesty is the very life force; adherence to truth is her daily duty. She must plant the seedlings of fear (of sin, of the Lord) in her heart and cultivate the charm of humility. In the religious, moral, and physical fields, she must adhere to the strict

dictates of *dharma* and take that as the essence of all education (*vidya*). She must be prepared to sacrifice even her life for the sake of maintaining honour; she must nourish and preserve her chastity and her adoration of the husband. This is the chief *dharma* of woman. This is the reason for her very birth as woman.