

Chapter 16. Compassion and Cleanliness

The student seeking spiritual knowledge (*vidya*) must possess kindness, compassion, and love toward all living beings. Kindness to all beings should be the student's very nature. If it is absent, the student becomes a boor. More than anything else, spiritual knowledge means the quality of compassion toward living beings. If a person bears ill will against any being, his education has no meaning. The advice given in the *Gita*,

with no ill-will toward all or any being
adweshtha sarva bhuthaanaam,

conveys the same message. In the same manner, on and off, the *Gita* warns that any insult or injury or even neglect directed against any living being is an act that insults, injures, or neglects the Divine (*Sarva jiva thiraskaaram Kesavam prathigachhati*). Love and compassion must not be limited to mankind. They must enfold every living being.

The *Gita* says,

The learned person who has acquired humility through spiritual knowledge must deal with the cow, the *brahmin*, the elephant, the dog, and the eater of dog-flesh with equal compassion and consideration.

Vidya vinaya sampanne braahmani gavi hasthini Shuni chaiva shvapaakecha, punditaah sama dharshinah.

Uniform compassion shown in this manner transforms itself into uniform welfare for the recipients. Wishing well for all is the sign of one who has earned spiritual knowledge. The narrow vision that is limited to the community has to be given up. Indian (*Bharathiyas*) culture emphasises the highest truth, the broadest vision. Imparting this ideal is the purpose of spiritual education, as laid down in India (Bharath). No other country has placed such a lofty, all-inclusive, beneficial ideal before its people.

Today, the country is facing ruin because this ideal has been neglected, spiritual education has been grossly circumscribed, and the educational system is polluting the social organism with narrowness and crookedness. So, marked changes have to be made in the system. At present, we have mere book learning. But what is learned from books has to be confirmed and corrected by practising it in social living. Only then can the knowledge of the kinship between person and person be gained. Thereby, learning is transformed into spiritual knowledge (*vidya*). Spiritual knowledge cannot be acquired by merely mastering reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Each student must, after intelligent inquiry, decide for themselves during every occasion which goal is best and which action is best suited to realise it. Both the goal and the action must serve the needs of society and help it to progress. People should not be involved in injustice, violence, and immorality. Nor should they deem their own gain as primary.

The importance of cleanliness

Students have to pay great attention to another important quality: cleanliness, both outer and inner. When either of these is absent, the person becomes useless for any task. The clothes one wears, the books one reads,

and the surrounding environment must be clean. This is the outer cleanliness. That is to say, every material object one has to deal with for living has to be kept clean. The teeth and eyes, food and drink, all should be free from dirt. One can be healthy as a result of all this. The body has to be scrubbed and washed every day, or else layers of dust will cause itching and boils will emerge. Not only will one's condition be rendered miserable, but it may cause infections in others. One may possess only one or two sets of clothing, but care should be taken to wash them before wearing. They should not gather dirt.

The books used for study should not be thrown about as one pleases. Scribbling on the pages must be avoided. Paper should be preserved clean and spotless. Those who see them must appreciate the care taken by the student to keep things clean. The room where the student resides and the adjacent area must be kept clean and free from stink. And, inside the room, no indecent pictures should be hung on the walls. Only pictures that inspire great thoughts and high ideals should be visible to the eye. The student must be able to draw on themselves the love of all.

However rich a person may be, the person can't be happy without health and can't derive full joy from the riches owned. A meal makes the person exhausted; without a meal, the person feels weak. Thus, the person plods on without ever being happy. So, external cleanliness promotes health and happiness.

The importance of inner cleanliness

Next, we consider inner cleanliness—that is to say, keeping the mind and the intellect free from dirt, serene and sacred. When thoughts and feelings are impure and agitated, one cannot be calm and happy. When the mind is polluted, reactions are polluted. To keep the mind clean, one has to analyse sympathetically situations involving others and their activities, and then decide on how to react to them. One should not rush to draw conclusions. Adopting the reactions of others is not desirable. One must resolve on any action only after intelligent discrimination and inquiry. “Some of our people are doing this, so we will do it too.” This attitude is mean and demeaning, it is a sign of weakness. It is the consequence of basic ignorance. Sheep behave in that manner.

Born as people, moving about as educated persons, yet stupidly following others as sheep do and polluting the minds with ideas borrowed from the lips of others—these things are to be avoided.

The ideas and pronouncements of others may often be personal, or they may induce feelings of hatred between people. Why should we accept them as ours and mould our feelings accordingly? We should not try to shape our feelings and patterns of behaviour to conform to those of others. We should not relinquish our faith, our experience, and our innate holiness.

We may not always be able to know the reasons for our faith. It originates and is shaped by our own personal likes and dislikes, our own dominant feelings. But we must not become the target for anger, hatred, and jealousy and the evil deeds into which they lead us. A student must cultivate wide, inclusive feelings. Only then is the student entitled to acquire the higher learning. Only then can the student earn respect in society. The student must keep far away from narrow, selfish thoughts, feelings, and plans.