

Exploring ‘Self-Awareness’ with the Youth

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śreyaś ca preyaś ca manusyam etah
tau samparitya vivinakti dhirah
śreyo hi dhiro’bhipreyaso vrnite
preyo mando yoga-ksemād vrnite
— Kathopanisad

[Translation: Both — the truly good (śreyaḥ) and the ephemeral pleasant (preyaḥ) — present themselves to man. While the heroic wise person (dhirah) discriminates carefully between the two and chooses śreyaḥ over preyaḥ, the fool (mandah) chooses preyaḥ, desiring to acquire and preserve various sense-objects].

THIS *Upanisadic* message, supposedly conveyed by Lord Yama to the young truth-seeker, Nachiketa, according to ancient fable, points to a great truth — one that is universal and timeless, and indeed very relevant in education. Are we preparing our youth — at least, the best among them — to take to the heroic wise path of the *dhirah*, the fulfilling path of *śreyaḥ*? The evidence, unfortunately, points heavily to the contrary. The vast majority of our ‘educated’ population are clearly on the *mandah’s* path of *preyaḥ* — with a focus almost entirely on enjoying various sensual pleasures, amassing wealth and acquiring power, at any cost. Cynical as it may sound, there is some truth in Theodore Roosevelt’s famous

remark: *A man who has never gone to school may steal from a freight car; but if he has a university education, he may steal the whole railroad.*

According to ancient wisdom, the thirst (*trsnā* in Sanskrit) for happiness is a natural craving in all sentient beings, and arises from a sense of separation from our Source. It is but natural that we should seek to quench this thirst in all kinds of ways, beginning with sense-pleasures, wealth and power. The *mandah’s* way of *preyaḥ* is indeed how we all begin our lives, but in an enlightened culture, we are meant to be *aware* of and to rise above the entrapment of our lower nature. We are meant to discover and manifest in our lives our true higher nature, governed by

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śreyah. Should not our education — at least in our best schools and colleges — facilitate and inspire this full flowering of human potential? At present, it would appear that this 'flowering' is limited to highly specialized and narrow domains, and even here, the powerful forces of *preyah* tend to prevail and overwhelm.

Existential Challenge for Youth in India

In my opinion, the biggest existential challenge facing India's young people today is to think for themselves about who they really are, what they are doing, and why they are doing it. In the amazing economic and technological upsurge of modern India, where there is so much promise, millions of young people all seem to be getting on the same train.

They appear to be moving in lock- step, striving to get good jobs, so that they can get married, have children, and be able to send their children to good schools, so that they can get good education, get good jobs, and get married, and have children, and so on. There's a lot of drive and ambition, but not a lot of deeper introspection or consideration of the fundamental philosophical and metaphysical questions about who we really are and why we are here.

— Andrew Cohen

There is so much pressure on our youth — from all sides: parents, society, media — to 'succeed' in the 'rat race' that they fail to look inward and discover where their true inner calling lies. Many of them are driven into aspiring to become engineers and doctors, while their aptitudes

may well lie elsewhere. Even those who discover, through their college education, that their aptitudes indeed lie in the fields of core engineering and medicine, find themselves strangely compelled to abandon their calling, falling prey to the relentless forces of *preyah* sweeping across our culture. Thus, we see some of the best IIT students, who would have made excellent engineers and researchers, ending up in finance and software, tempted by the mind-boggling salaries that they are offered. Indeed, they are persuaded to do so by their own parents, who celebrate their success at being able to earn, in a short time, wealth that they have not seen in their entire lifetime. Likewise, in the field of medicine, even the best students, who find that they have a natural calling for healing, abandon this calling to choose the most popular and lucrative options.

Hardly anyone pauses to reflect and ask: *wherefore, whither?* These basic questions often emerge at a later stage — the so-called 'mid- life crisis'. It is, of course, never too late to take to the path of the, *śreya*, but it is not easy to do so, when the brilliance of one's youthful energy has ebbed away and one finds oneself 'burnt out', fatigued and rather disillusioned with life. It takes significant courage, inspiration, discipline and aspiration to become a *dhirah*; the earlier, the better! Besides, often, we find people in their later years, looking more for solace and therapy, rather than authentic growth.

The crisis that we see witness within ourselves is reflected in the chaos that we see outside, for which we are all collectively responsible — the terrible disparity

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of poverty and abundance, side-by-side, the growing pollution and irreversible damage to ecology and environment, the unbridled corruption at all levels, and the incapacity of politicians and leaders, nearly all of whom seem to be lost in the trappings of *preyah*. It is so easy to get submerged in a feeling of hopelessness, and yet nothing can be more damaging to us than to lose hope and faith, and get into victimization and the blame game. We need to do all that we can, in our respective limited spheres, to move ourselves and inspire others along the path of *śreyah*.

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Of what avail is it if we can travel to the moon,
If we cannot cross the abyss that separates
us from ourselves?

This is the most important of all journeys,
And without it, all the rest are useless.

— Thomas Merton

At IIT Madras, we have been exploring various ways of introducing 'inner' development in education. These have been mostly 'extra-curricular' in nature, using various fora, such as *Reflections* and *Vivekananda Study Circle*, involving mostly talks and discussions, which dwell on diverse themes. We realized the need for a sustained structure to these programmes in order to serve meaningfully the objective of facilitating authentic inner transformation. Thus, we came upon the idea of developing a regular course that is part of the curriculum, and not something extra-curricular. We wanted the course to be 'exploratory' in nature, unlike the other courses in the Institute. The approach

had to be 'open', rather than prescriptive, while at the same time, aiming to be deep and transformative.

In October 2011, the Senate of IIT Madras approved a proposal for starting a 3-credit 'free elective' course on *Self-Awareness*, open to all interested students of the Institute, PhD to BTech, *to enable students to understand self-awareness based on traditional Indian wisdom and modern approaches; to learn to find inspiration, take responsibility for one's inner life; to live with integrity and contribute creatively towards the well-being of all.*

This course has been run three times since January 2012, and the response from the students who 'credited' the course and others, has been overwhelmingly positive. Based on this experience, we are now offering an advanced course in *Integral Karmayoga*, dealing with *spirituality in work*, and is based primarily on some of the universal teachings from the *Bhagavadgītā* — described in the words of Sri Aurobindo as *our chief national heritage, our hope for the future.*

'Self-Awareness' ?

Youth are, by nature, intellectually inclined; but too much thinking can be a handicap when it comes to holistic development. Our students and faculty train themselves to think a lot, because thinking indeed is a primary function in the academic world, where spoken sentences commonly begin with 'I think . . .'; it is relatively rare to hear anyone here say 'I feel . . .' While thinking indeed is a tremendous strength in academics, and in general, in reasoning and conceptual

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ideation, it needs to be supplemented by a healthy development of other human potentials, for holistic and balanced growth.

When we tend to get locked up in our heads, we lose touch with other aspects of our being. We even often forget, or rather lose awareness of the fact, that we have physical bodies that are capable of *sensing*, which is different from *thinking*. The body is an excellent sensor that can reveal truths about ourselves, which our minds tend to ignore, hide or lie about. We also have *desires* of various kinds, which are distinctly different from thoughts, and which are the driving force of *preyah*. It is very necessary to recognize their existence and to deal with them wisely. Otherwise, they tend to catch us unawares, often demanding immediate gratification, and capable of causing much anguish, anxiety and confusion. When the cravings are strong, they persuade and overwhelm our mental will into submission, and our thoughts end up serving our desires, often unconsciously, compelling us to rationalize or justify them, or else, making us feeling guilty. Desires also commonly manifest in a negative sense — when things 'go wrong' and people behave in a manner contrary to our expectations, and we lack the capability and the wisdom of *śreyah* to deal effectively with the consequent anguish, anger and confusion.

In addition to sensations and desires, there are *emotions* that speak another language — different from the language of thoughts — that we need to be aware of and to understand. They have their

own intelligence, and are especially valuable in developing our relationships with others and the environment. Love, empathy, care and compassion are imperative for our individual and collective well-being; thinking cannot develop these. Finally, there are *intuitions* of various kind that transcend the realm of thoughts, and emerge from a much wider spectrum of consciousness that is normally not accessible to most people. Such intuitions can emerge either from the spiritual depths of our hearts or from the wideness above. They are trans-rational and provide a true holistic perspective, yielding unity and synthesis, which is very different from the analytical methods of the thinking mind. When these intuitions emerge in an enduring manner from the heart, they provide for a true compass in life, clearly pointing towards one's life purpose. Thus, paradoxically, the path of *śreyah* leads us not only towards unity and universality, but also well developed individuality. The individual purpose of life must necessarily be in alignment with a universal or cosmic purpose of creation, which according to the wisdom traditions, is towards manifesting truth, beauty and goodness and the evolution of consciousness.

For healthy conscious living it is therefore necessary to (i) be fully aware of all that happens in our field of consciousness, (ii) to gain growing awareness of one's life purpose aligned in the path of *śreyah*, (iii) to be aware when we fall into dysfunction and misalignment, and (iv) to take full responsibility for our inner responses and external behaviour and thereby strive

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for correction and development of our potentials to their fullness. Self-awareness is a powerful means to facilitate such inner transformation and development.

In the 'self-awareness' course we find participants struggling initially to appreciate the manifold nature of their inner being. Compulsive thinking is second nature to them, but they realize that even their thinking skills need to improve significantly. They discover that much of the relentless mental activity is non-productive and dissipative in nature. The overworked mind tends to behave like a computer that cannot be turned off; there are too many 'programs', mostly hidden, working unnecessarily in the back-ground, dissipating a lot of energy continuously. Besides draining energy, the mental noise induces stress and fatigue, and when there is a real need to do some hard concentrated thinking, the system often 'hangs'.

This obsession with thinking is a widely prevalent disease in modern times. It is truly a disease, because it puts us *ill at ease* — something that we are sometimes dimly aware of. To be able to get free, even temporarily, from this imprisonment — being 'locked up' in our heads — can indeed feel liberating.

Freedom, Delight and Awareness

One may be surrounded by great beauty, by mountains and fields and rivers. But unless one is alive to it all, one might just as well be dead.

— Jiddu Krishnamurti

It is ironical that even while living amidst the beautiful sylvan surroundings

at IIT Madras, the vast majority of students seem to move about, completely *unaware* of the immediate *presence* of wondrous and alive Nature all around us. We remain locked up in our respective narrow mental worlds, and not necessarily engaged in solving brilliantly the many technological problems of the world! In fact, if only we were *aware*, we would quickly discover that most of our mental activity is random and unfocussed, often revolving endlessly around routine chores or petty concerns and anxieties.

Participants are pleasantly taken by surprise when we shift outdoors for some of our 'Self-Awareness' studies — under the shade of a beautiful banyan tree. They are even more surprised when we talk about the importance of *doing nothing*, of just *being*, simply *aware*, of being *centred*. All that they have to do is to pay quiet attention, and be keenly aware of all that they experience. This often turns out to be a collective transformational experience.

For example, with eyes closed, we learn together to listen to and enjoy the sounds of Nature — the rustling of leaves in the breeze, the orchestra of crickets, the full-throated song of a bird or the chirping of a squirrel, interspersed with the sounds of human activity and the buzz of vehicular movements. Every sound has its own special note, eventually receding into the background. In the absence of mental noise, all these natural occurrences sound truly wonderful. We feel an immediate sense of release from our habitual, narrow and constricted sense of awareness and self-identity 'stuck in the head' and find ourselves in a vast unbounded expanse

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of delightful awareness. In that vast field of awareness, we remain attentive and present, clearly aware — not only of various objects (such as sounds) that come and go naturally — but, more importantly, of the vast stillness and silence from which they all emerge and into which they dis-appear. Then, there is only that unbounded stillness, *pure awareness*. The worries and anxieties that plague us routinely then appear to be remote, petty and insignificant.

Participants begin to find value in such simple, yet profound, states of being. We try to expose them to various kinds of simple exercises in awareness. For example, sitting together, we sometimes try to re-awaken our own experience of the world in our infancy. Everything — from a little ant to a huge tree — appears to be so fascinating, so wondrous, so alive, so mysterious, so delightful!

It is so important — so very important — to experience this daily! The naturally beautiful and harmonious surroundings in the 640-acre forest at IIT Madras, where we live and work, offers us the perfect ambience for this. We make use of the gift of sensory perception — the very same senses that can trap us in *preyah* for something sublime, filled with authentic well-being, beauty and harmony, that constitute the very nature of *śreyah*. How wonderful it would be, if we could learn to soak ourselves in this Spirit, and remain 'centred' in such awareness most often, anywhere, even in the midst of the hustle and bustle of daily life!

Through such awareness, we discover

that we have the freedom and objectivity to look closely at any 'object' that arises in the vast field of our awareness. Not only does the magnificent forest around us, or the starry night sky with lazily floating white clouds, that suddenly come alive in our awareness, but an entire inner landscape of sensations, impulses, desires, emotions, thoughts and intuitions that also come alive in us.

Such awareness helps us to pay focused attention to the reality of the present. It helps us meet our purpose — any task that needs to be done — most effectively. It also can have a profoundly positive influence on others, as for example, when we learn to listen whole-heartedly. Indeed, without such centred awareness of the present, we tend to remain distracted, and life tends to become more hurried, stressful, and often devoid of meaning and delight.

Delight at Work

For who could live or breathe if there were not this Delight of existence as the ether in which we dwell? From Delight all these being are born, by Delight they exist and grow, to Delight they return.

— Taittiriyaopanisaḍ

Delight (*ānanda*), unfortunately, is not something we experience frequently, and the students know this only too well. It is necessary for all of us to find delight in the work that we do and in the relationships that we have.

There is an instructive story about two extreme attitudes to work that we discuss with our students on the theme of delight in work.

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Once upon a time, during the construction of the Taj Mahal — a magnificent monument made of marble — someone, observing the labourers at work, asked one of them, ‘What are you doing?’ The labourer, who seemed to be mechanically engaged in cutting the marble stone, barely looked up, and mumbled, ‘Can’t you see? I’m cutting stone’. The visitor walked down the line of workers, and paused in front of another labourer, who seemed to be different from the others. This worker had a sparkle in his eyes. He would occasionally pause, look up, as if reflecting deeply on something, and when he put his chisel against the stone, he did so with great skill, enthusiasm and delight. When he saw the visitor pausing in front of him, he gave a gentle smile. When the visitor posed to him the same question, ‘What are you doing?’, his reply was: ‘I’m building the Taj Mahal!’

This story of the two stone-cutters is deeply meaningful and exemplifies the difference between whole-hearted and half-hearted engagement at work. The vast majority of people — nine out of every ten, according to the estimates offered by our students — seem to belong to the half-hearted category. Indeed, this is also testified by Stephen Covey in his book *The 8th Habit* based on several decades of research, conducted worldwide:

Despite all our progress and technological development, most people are not thriving in the organizations they work for. They are neither fulfilled nor excited. They are frustrated. They have no clear vision. They are bogged down and distracted. They

don’t feel they can improve much.

Surely, this is not a healthy way to live life. It shows clearly that our potentials remain tremendously unutilized, and that we live uninspired lives. Often, this happens because we are not doing the jobs we are meant to do. We are simply doing things because others said it is important to do so, or because we believe it is required for our survival. Such work is either uninteresting or involves much struggle. It is only on rare occasion that we find work that is delightful and rather effortless and perfect. In such rare moments, we feel as though we are part of a ‘flow’ and some mysterious higher force is at work through our being. How wonderful life would be if these moments enter into our lives more frequently. This requires us to identify our life purpose — the very purpose for which we have been born. Throughout the course, we encourage students to discover those activities that bring them delight and with which they resonate and from which they feel a profound sense of fulfilment — something that the usual motivations of *preyah*, such as money and fame, cannot grant.

Our course on ‘Self-Awareness’ is exploratory in nature. It has many elements, all of which are aimed at inner transformation for authentic and fulfilling living. The participants need to look experientially into their own selves, and their understanding is reflected in the many assignments that they are required to do. They are also exposed to useful breathing and meditation techniques monitoring the physiological effects of

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their practice. Essentially, they have learnt the importance of disengaging and 'stepping back' into the wideness of awareness and so remaining 'centred' and inwardly calm, even under difficult situations. Many report significant improvements in their relationships and work culture. A few have also reported clarity in discovering the purpose.

A lot of work is done, as part of this exploration, on understanding conflicts in human relationships. In this connection, the Arbinger Institute has published two wonderful books called *Leadership and Self-deception* and *The Anatomy of Peace*. They use a simple term, 'in the box' to describe what happens to us when we get into conflict. Invariably we lose focus on all our noble intentions and aspirations (*śreyah*) and shift to defending our ego-selves at any cost. Our hearts are then 'at war' instead of being 'at peace' and in this process, we end up conveniently blaming others and the system for the situation we frequently find ourselves in. We tend to treat others as objects instead of humans like ourselves having similar cares and concerns, and our views get distorted in order to justify our positions.

People who came together to help an

organization succeed actually end up delighting in each others' failures and resenting each others' successes . . . We withhold in-formation and resources from one another, try to control one another, and blame one another. When I'm blaming A or B or department XYZ (and suggesting that all our problems will be solved if only they straighten up), I'm doing it because their shortcomings justify my failure to improve.

— The Arbinger Institute

Finally, as part of the exploration participants are required to do a detailed study of *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse — the wonderful story of a young truth-seeker who had the courage and integrity to abide in his aspiration, to explore fearlessly, to awaken and find fulfilment in life.

It is hoped that exploring self-awareness contributes in an enduring way to the awakening and flowering of the youth. Let us end with a quotation from Sri Aurobindo.

Learn to live within, to act always from within . . . instead of living in the surface, which is always at the mercy of the shocks and blows of life.

— Sri Aurobindo

Reference Books

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