



Rose Petals

Extracts from Sri Babuji's Satsangs

Education – Kindling the Love of Learning

Sri Babuji established the Saibaba Central School in 1983, in Ongole, Andhra Pradesh, to earn his livelihood as a householder. The School has acquired a reputation for excellence in the District and both administration and the staff continue working to implement Guruji's innovative views in the education of children. His vision is embodied in the motto he created for the School: 'Love of Learning, Learning to Love'.



DEVOTEE: Guruji, I have a question about education: What values should we transmit to our children at school, and also at home?

GURUJI: The purpose of education is not to indoctrinate children with one's values, it is to make them capable and well-equipped, so they can learn how to conduct themselves in the world. For example, how to read, how to write, how to learn, and if they want to know about a particular subject, how to browse and look for it on the web. These things they need to be taught.



Shirdi, 2009

I like giving children food for thought. Whether it is Sai Baba or atheism, rationalism or communism, whatever it is, don't indoctrinate or brainwash them. Let everything be their personal discovery. We don't need to infuse them with beliefs. Personally I am opposed to children being given religious education and I didn't do it when I was running the school. In the prayer I wrote for the School there is not even the name of Baba. It is a totally impersonal ideal, not even God. An impersonal principle, a cosmic law that the children pray to, invoking that spirit of enquiry and love. That is what I like.

Inculcate the love of learning in children, give them the ability to think, and do not limit their thinking. Do not tell them who God is. Nobody told me Sai Baba was God when I was studying. Later, I became a Sai Baba devotee. Let it come like that, by personal choice.

Children should be given a free environment where they can learn, where they can pursue and form their own values. To me, that is Baba's teaching.

DEVOTEE: Guruji, how can we create a free environment to help our children learn?

GURUJI: One should have free thinking, free thought. If we teach them all kinds of concepts about God or no-God, what kind of freedom is it? What kind of free thought is it if we brainwash small children? What I would do is, not give them any such concepts! If they have the desire to seek something, they will follow it. In my view, that is free thought.

DEVOTEE: So should true education encourage children to question?

GURUJI: Yes, there should be free, all-round development. And it should depend upon the individual. That choice, that freedom, should be given to every child, to every human being, every adult – not only the child. Questioning everything is the correct thing. Let children question everything.



GURUJI: It is easy to teach bias and prejudice, it is very difficult to teach a broad, unbiased spectrum. Bias, negativity and complaint easily enter into our minds. I have seen in history that what happens in many movements is that their leaders, instead of focusing on what they love and on their goal, invariably they find an object for the people to hate. They create something even if nothing is there. Then based on that hatred, like racial prejudice, people's love for an ideal grows. Because it is easy to teach hatred, teaching love is very difficult.



GURUJI: Children should love their school. What things make them love their school? For them, school means the teacher, so the teacher should be lovable, not someone with a cane. Once children love their teacher, they'll love education, what the teacher says. If they are afraid of the teacher, they'll be afraid of the school and of what they do there, which means education – they'll have an aversion to education. If they like the teacher everything is solved, so that's the main thing. They should love the teacher, he should be like their hero or heroine. Then discipline and love of learning automatically come. So, at the end of the day, when the final school bell rings, how will the children react? If they shout with joy and relief, "Hurrah, hurrah!" we have failed.

Children should enjoy school. How many children enjoy their classes? They are simply going to school, studying to get marks, some merit, some rank, then entrance to a good college, or finally, go to the States – that is the dream of Indian youth now. What I am trying to say is, if we make education enjoyable, it doesn't mean we make students incapable of succeeding. They will definitely succeed, naturally, easily. Such children will definitely excel in the competitive world outside.



DEVOTEE: What is the ideal learning environment to support love of learning?

GURUJI: The ideal environment is where the teaching is well-organized but the children are not aware of it. They should feel that they are learning on their own, by their own choice, not because they have to do it. Learning comes only when you want to learn, not when you must learn. If you provide an environment where children feel free to learn, not because they are obliged or forced, then that is the ideal environment. It is an utopian ideal [Guruji laughs] so we have to strike a balance between the ideal and what's practical.



DEVOTEE: How can we help our children to learn?

GURUJI: By igniting their love of learning through creating curiosity and a spirit of enquiry in them, an appetite for learning, a hunger for knowledge. If we can kindle this, it is enough: whether we teach them something or not, the child will learn, anybody will learn. This is the key, the formula. Into this formula everything fits that has been researched and said about teaching: inducing and infusing curiosity. If curiosity is there, observation will naturally come. You can't simply ask children to observe nature. They will observe and think, "Okay, we are observing, so what?" Because that also is simply following an instruction. Observation like this doesn't serve the purpose. First, curiosity should be there. Then observation makes sense and serves the purpose.

What I am saying is, we should infuse the child with a spirit of enquiry. Even when we want him to learn a particular thing, we should begin by asking a question that creates curiosity in the child's mind – like the state of mind of a scientist before he makes a discovery. Especially in the natural sciences and mathematics, where many discoveries have been made, this would be easy to implement. First, motivate the child with questions that make him puzzled about something – his mind should always be puzzled. Then start giving answers to the questions which you yourself have created. By posing questions that make the child wonder, "what would be the answer?", interest in the answer is created. Then, when you give the answer, it is like giving food to a hungry person, not simply dumping information he won't take because it's not needed! Why do children have to know when Shakespeare was born? It's not their need. When was the Elizabethan period? When did Queen Victoria reign? Who cares? It's not their need to know these things. But it's expected of them, so they learn to memorize the answers, what else can they do? You can't completely avoid memorizing when learning because we are a part of the total educational structure in India. That we can't change. Students have to write exams and they have to be able to fit in society and compete with other children. So memorization cannot be totally avoided. But we can add something to it, a flavour of interest, to make it more spicy.

It all depends on our ability to create the right mood and situation depending on the maturity and stage of the child. I'm just giving some tips. It can't be applied to all children at every stage in the same way.



GURUJI: The most critical stage of learning is when children are of pre-school age, because that is the budding stage when you can really inculcate love of learning in them. This is the decisive time.

I have observed that people are losing their love of learning because their focus is not on learning but on remembering. Observe how children learn – how we learn also! First a child identifies and names things, “This is a chair, this is a table, he is so-and-so, this is a house, that is a tree.” He learns to recognize objects and speak in his native language, English or Telugu, whatever his mother tongue is. A young child speaks quite well grammatically. But does she know grammar? Just go to a small child and ask, “Where is your daddy?” “My daddy went to the office,” or “He went to Delhi.” She uses gender and the past tense correctly – how does she know? Who taught her that grammar? So first we learn to speak by hearing others and then, when further expression is needed, the role of writing comes. But in India we begin with writing, the final stage, so the whole learning process is topsy-turvy.

The most important thing is that learning should be play for children, because learning in itself has as yet no meaning for them. The moment they go to school they are taught the English alphabet, the ABC’s – why should they learn the ABC’s? Actually, it’s meaningless! What will a small child of two or three understand by this? First we should be aware of what a meaningless thing we are doing! So we should try to make it more meaningful to the child in some relevant way. How? That depends upon the talent of the teacher.

This is why education often fails in creating love of learning and why so many children are becoming averse to education. They don’t like going to school, and they don’t like their teachers because they make them do things which are meaningless to them! How to make learning more relevant and meaningful? Can we do it? Let us experiment, let us explore and do it. That is why at the beginning I said we must inculcate a love of learning.

The principle is that the child should not feel he is being taught. Through songs, plays, stories, and so many other ways, he can be taught. To an outsider it may look as though no teaching is being given. “What’s with these games and sports, with this singing and dancing? What is this?” But it is through activities like these that the child learns in a natural way. And I like children learning in the natural way.



DEVOTEE: As a parent and a mother, I have a desire for my children to do well in their studies. Is that desire for them okay, even if it may not be their wish or desire?

GURUJI: It was also like that for us when we were children. All parents expect things for their children that the children may not like; it’s the same now as then. Try to see yourself in your child and there will be no problem. It is a good wish, that wish. Children are also individuals, they have their own reasons, their own desires. They have their own image of who they are. Try your best to give them what you think is best. The only thing is, we shouldn’t get too worried about it.

DEVOTEE: But can you push?

GURUJI: Yes, you can push. Because children need help and you can help them. We push because we love. Think of when the mother wants to teach her child to walk. Does she think she’s inflicting a punishment? The child falters and falls down, sometimes even gets bruised or injured, but still she encourages it. “Come on, go ahead! Come on, walk, walk!” When the child comes nearer, she takes three steps further back and says, “Come, come

¹ The context for Gurujī’s remarks is that formal education in India generally begins with kindergarten classes for children at age two or three.

again!" Then, just when the child is about to catch hold of the parent, she steps back and calls again, "Come, come, come!" The mother is not teasing or punishing the child, or not loving it – it's not that. She wants it to learn something important. It looks as if the parent is going away – testing and teasing – and it is like that with you also. Even though you take three steps forward, sometimes the guru may take three steps back. "Come again," he says. He knows what to do.



DEVOTEE: It is important to me that my children grow up with good morals. What is the best way to inculcate them?

GURUJI: Morals should be taught as a science. Science means free thought. Thinking, questioning, investigating, that is science. You should make them investigate, think, and explore moral values. That is the real moral science lesson. Not simply telling them, "Don't tell lies. Always respect your elders and teachers." Talk to them about the value of morality and other human values, and why they are needed.

My liking is for free thought. Tell them about scientists. Tell them not only about the life of Baba or Ramana Maharshi or Vivekananda – tell them about Newton and Einstein. Instill in them the spirit of adventure and discovery. Show them movies about the lives of different saints and scientists and stress one thing – adventure! You should infuse that in them. These are the moral sciences, not scriptural precepts or commandments.



GURUJI: Observe how a child grows and becomes an adult. At some stage it simply ceases to enjoy its toys. Because it gets more enjoyment in the real world of maturity, its toys start looking less attractive, less enjoyable, and give less pleasure, so they slowly drop away. That is how growth occurs. We can't make a flower bloom overnight by simply expanding its petals. We must give it manure and water, good soil, sunlight and protection, all the things that help it become a flower. Then the bud grows by itself and matures naturally into a flower.



Sri Babuji's views on education are summed up in the morning prayer he wrote for the Saibaba Central School he founded:

School Pledge and Prayer

May my mind be always given to the spirit of enquiry and learning;
I'll never let my eye of reason be blinded
by dry and dead habit and superstitions;
I do not let my mind be subject to narrow and ugly prejudices
of class, caste, creed, religion and nationality;
I love my country and strive to realize the ideal of being a world citizen;
I always act towards others, as I desire them to act toward me;

I do nothing that will bring discredit
on myself, my teachers or my fellow pupils.
May my mind be without fear and my head always held high;
I will strive at all times to keep my school a lovely and happy place,
so that all of us may be proud of it.
This is my solemn pledge and soul's prayer.



Guruji's voice

