

EDUCATION AND THE SACRED: SOME PERSPECTIVES FROM THE UPANIṢADS

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Abstract

This essay discusses three components of the Upanisads' teaching model. The starting point for education, according to the Upanisads, is for the teacher to know who they are—why do I teach? What are my limitations as a teacher? What are my priorities? The second component is to ask, “Who are my students? What are their needs?” The best kind of teaching is student-driven and responsive to the students' interests and needs. And finally, the Upanisads use a particular method of teaching that is experiential, dialogical, and personal. The essay concludes with some thoughts on educational content.

Keywords: Chandogya, Upanisad, Bhagavata Purana, education, teaching method, student-driven learning



Resumen

Este ensayo discute tres componentes del modelo de enseñanza de los Upanisads. El punto de partida para la educación, según los Upanisads, es que el maestro sepa quiénes son, ¿por qué enseño? ¿Cuáles son mis limitaciones como profesor? ¿Cuáles son mis prioridades? El segundo componente es preguntar: “¿Quiénes son mis alumnos? ¿Cuáles son sus necesidades?” El mejor tipo de enseñanza está dirigida por los estudiantes y responde a los intereses y necesidades de los estudiantes. Y finalmente, los Upanisads usan un método particular de enseñanza que es experimental, dialógico y personal. El ensayo concluye con algunas reflexiones sobre el contenido educativo.

Palabras clave: Chandogya, Upanisad, Bhagavata Purana, educación, método de enseñanza, aprendizaje dirigido por los estudiantes.

Thank you for inviting me to comment on the theme of “Education and the Sacred.” I am grateful for the opportunity. This is the third conference in Peru that I have attended—first Psychology and the Sacred, then Art and the Sacred, and now, finally, Education and the Sacred. Of the three themes, this one is the most fundamental, since education is the foundation of every field of learning and every aspect of human activity. There is so much that can be said on this important topic and I am eager to hear the reflections of others. My thoughts on this matter stem from fifteen years of experience as a professor in the United States, engaged in full time teaching and research.

Allow me to begin with a personal experience. As part of my professional duties, I often attend academic conferences in my field of research. As the days go by, and I listen to one learned presentation after another, I begin to feel sorely inadequate, like a mouse in the presence of elephantine scholars. Everyone seems to be discussing the latest groundbreaking book, but I have not even heard of it as yet. All the other professors have so much more linguistic ability and historical knowledge than I do. I feel a twinge of jealousy and the rise of ambition—I should read this, and study that, and present at this conference, and meet that person! It all becomes overwhelming and a bit frustrating.

But there is a remedy to this problem that I have tried to apply over the years. I find a quiet space, maybe an empty conference room or a chair on the verandah, and I pause to ask myself, “Who am I? Why did I enter this profession in the first place? I made certain choices that brought me to this place in life. Would I be willing to give up those choices in order to become like the people I am envying?” Throughout my career, I have prioritized my spiritual life, my family, and my students. I have tried to be a good teacher, not just a researcher, and I deeply value the relationships I have with my students. Choosing these priorities has naturally meant stepping back on other aspects of life, since no one can do it all. Would I be willing to give up these priorities in order to be the top scholar in my field, or to keep up with every book that has been published, or to be the most renowned speaker? The answer always rings true and clear: No! That is not who I am, nor would I be happy making such choices. I am first and foremost a servant of God, a responsible family man, and a committed teacher. The rest can come later.

Immediately I feel a sense of calm. My priorities are recalibrated, and I am able to return to the conference and make a genuine contribution. Indeed, when others recognize that a person’s contribution is coming from a place of commitment, contentment, and confidence, they appreciate it very much.

I tell this personal experience to make a simple point: The most important thing that the “sacred” can offer “education” is proper perspective. The religions of the world have ancient teaching traditions, with thousands of years of experience in transmitting knowledge and cultivating good character. The oldest teaching texts from India are the Upaniṣads, which the tradition dates to some 5000 years ago and scholars date to about 500 B.C. These sacred texts provide a model of education that has stood the test of time and inspired generations of teachers in the Vedic tradition. The Upaniṣads’ teaching model has three components: First, the educator asks, “Who am I?” Second, he or she asks, “Who are my students?” And finally, “What methods of teaching shall I use?” Each question follows naturally from the previous one. Let us go through each one in turn.

The starting point for education, say the Upaniṣads, is for the teacher to know who they are. Why do I teach? What are my limitations as a teacher? What are my priorities? As we saw above, a clear sense of purpose and the right perspective is essential for being an educator. Education that is grounded in a spiritual metaphysic (“I am the spirit soul, transcendent to the body”) will have a very different method and outcome than education that is grounded in a physical, economic notion of the self (“I am the body, and economic advancement defines success”). A teacher is one who has a clear idea of who they are, including their strengths and limitations as a teacher. Let me share an example: In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the jewel of India’s devotional wisdom, we find the example of the seeker Vidura who approaches the learned devotee Uddhava for knowledge. Uddhava was quite qualified to teach Vidura, but he desisted for two reasons: Vidura was much senior to Uddhava in age, and thus it was inappropriate for Uddhava to serve as Vidura’s guru (3.4.26). Furthermore, Uddhava was quite overwhelmed by the ecstasy of love for God and thus would have struggled to provide systematic instruction in his ecstatic state. Instead, Uddhava directed Vidura to an elderly sage who lived nearby, namely, Maitreya, who had the social standing and the steady composure needed to teach Vidura. The lesson we learn from this example is significant: a great teacher is someone who has an honest assessment of their own capacities and limitations, and thus they can do what is best for the student, even if that means sending the student onward.

Once we know who we are, we can move on to the second component of the Upaniṣadic teaching model, namely, “Who are my students? What are their needs?” The best kind of teaching is student-driven and responsive to the students’ interests and needs. Throughout the Upaniṣads and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, nearly every instruction is given directly in response to a student’s query. Indeed, it is extremely rare to find an instance when a teacher gives a lecture of his or her own accord. In fact, the same teacher will even give opposing teachings based on the needs of the student. For example, the itinerant sage Nārada tells King

Prācīnabarhiṣat to stop performing animal sacrifices, since religious rituals that harm other living beings cannot bring salvation (4.25.7). However, when Sage Nārada meets the hunter Mṛgāri, he gives him the opposite instruction. Mṛgāri would half-kill animals, breaking their bones in order to watch them die slowly and painfully. Nārada’s instruction to Mṛgāri is simple and clear: kill the animals quickly and fully. Of course, Nārada does eventually convince Mṛgāri to stop killing altogether, but initially, Mṛgāri and King Prācīnabarhiṣat needed very different instructions because they were at very different places in their spiritual progress.

In our work in the university, we often have to resist competency-based learning models that try to create uniform standards for every student to pass. In competency-based learning, students must demonstrate that they have mastered a particular set of facts or skills, and if they know the content already, they can “test out” of a particular class. This approach is good for some practical skills (such as learning to drive a car), but it is terrible for abstract knowledge, such as history, philosophy, or literature. A competency-based approach is boring for the advanced student, who has mastered the information and has nothing more to achieve, and it is frustrating for the weak student, who repeatedly misses the bar and feels like a failure. It is an impersonal teaching method that does not take into account where a student is at and how much they have improved. In contrast, the mark of a strong teacher is one who can raise the bar higher for advanced students, not allowing them to become complacent, while also encouraging the struggling student, congratulating them on how much they have improved. This can sometimes mean congratulating one student for the same quality of writing that we disapprove for another student. It can mean flagging a problem in one student’s writing that we ignore in another’s. Teaching is first about the needs of the student and second about conveying a certain quantity of content.

The third and final component of Upaniṣadic teaching that I would like to highlight is the *method* or process of teaching. Once we have understood who we are and who our students are, we can ask the question, “Given my own skills and limitations, and given my students needs and interests, *how* can I best convey to them what they need to learn?” The Upaniṣads demonstrate a beautiful method of teaching, which I would like to highlight with an example.

Once, in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (6.13), a father named Uddālaka is teaching his son, Śvetaketu, about the eternal self (*ātmā*), which is invisible but present in every living being, because it is the source of consciousness itself. Uddālaka teaches his son about the *ātmā* through several examples. I quote one example here in full, taken from Patrick Olivelle’s excellent English translation.

‘Put this chunk of salt in a container of water and come back tomorrow,’ [says the father]. The son did as he was told, and the father said to him: ‘The chunk of salt you put in the water last evening - bring it here.’ He groped for it but could not find it, as it had dissolved completely. ‘Now, take a sip from this corner,’ said the father. ‘How does it taste?’

‘Salty.’

‘Take a sip from the centre. - How does it taste?’

‘Salty.’

‘Take a sip from that corner. - How does it taste?’

‘Salty.’

‘Throw it out and come back later.’ He did as he was told and found that the salt was always there. The father told him: ‘You, of course, did not see it there, son; yet it was always right there.

‘The finest essence here - that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*ātman*). And that’s how you are, Svetaketu.’

‘Sir, teach me more.’

‘Very well, son.

There are several things to note about *how* Uddālaka teaches Śvetaketu. First the teaching is experiential, helping the child realize the self through hands-on experiment and experience, using elements of our natural environment. Secondly, the teaching is dialogical, engaging the child in a discussion and relying on his desire to learn more, as it becomes clear if we continue reading this section of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad. Third, the teaching is personal, taught one-on-one (or elsewhere in the Upaniṣads, in small groups). If we put the last two elements together—intensive discussion in small groups—we get one of the most effective methods of teaching. And finally, if we were to read the entire section, we would find that it is repetitive, like a spiral, coming back over the same point with different examples, each time reinforcing and refining the student’s understanding. The student, in response, demonstrates the humility and eagerness to learn more—“Sir, teach me more!” These, indeed, are teaching methods at their finest.

I suppose we should end this brief essay with some words about educational content. We have discussed the teacher, the student, and the process of learning, so it seems fitting to say a few words about content. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, in its second verse, offers us a succinct and profound definition of educational con-



tent: *vedyam vāstavam atra vastu śivadam*, “Knowledge is reality distinguished from illusion for the welfare of all.” (1.1.2, trans. by Prabhupāda). The first part of this statement seems intuitive: knowledge teaches us to separate fact from fiction, truth from falsity, reality from illusion. This is essential, but it is not sufficient. For something to qualify as knowledge, it must not only be true—it must be beneficial for others. Knowledge is not blind; it has a moral component, a sense of direction. Knowledge is driven by kindness and humility. We live in a world where we see that “information,” “facts,” “technology,” in the hands of the wrong people, without a moral or spiritual compass, can be disastrous. Such technologies might count as information, but they are not knowledge unless they are used for the benefit of others. And that requires teachers and students of good character.

And so it seems fitting that we should end with an ode to the teacher who acts as a compass, a captain, on the treacherous waters of worldly life. These beautiful verses from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (Śrīmad Bhāgavatam) are translated by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda:

*tvam naḥ sandarśito dhātrā
 dustaram nistitīrṣatām
 kalim sattva-haram puṁsām
 karṇa-dhāra ivārṇavam*

“We think that we have met Your Goodness by the will of providence, just so that we may accept you as captain of the ship for those who desire to cross the difficult ocean of Kali, which deteriorates all the good qualities of a human being.” (1.1.22).

And then the teacher responds, with humility and devotion:

*aham hi prṣṭo 'ryamaṇo bhavadbhir
ācakṣa ātmāvagamo 'tra yāvān
nabhaḥ patanty ātma-samaṁ patattriṇas
tathā samaṁ viṣṇu-gatiṁ vipaścitaḥ*

“O sages, who are as powerfully pure as the sun, I shall try to describe to you the transcendental pastimes of Viṣṇu as far as my knowledge is concerned. As the birds fly in the sky as far as their capacity allows, so do the learned devotees describe the Lord as far as their realization allows.” (1.18.23)

Thank you again for this opportunity.

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