

The True Function of a Teacher

"THE BANYANS and the tamarinds dominated the small valley, which was green and alive after the rains. In the open the sun was strong and biting, but in the shade it was pleasantly cool. The shadows were deep, and the old trees were shapely against the blue sky. There was an astonishing number of birds in that valley, birds of many different kinds, and they would come to these trees and so quickly disappear in them. There would probably be no more rain for several months but now the countryside lay green and peaceful, the wells were full, and there was hope in the land. The corrupting towns were far beyond the hills, but the nearby villages were filthy and the people were starving. The government only promised, and the villagers seemed to care so little. There was beauty and gladness all about them, but they had no eyes for it nor for their own inward riches. Amidst so much loveliness the people were dull and empty".

He was a teacher with little pay and a large family, but he was interested in education. He said he had a difficult time making ends meet, but he managed somehow, and poverty was not a disturbing factor. Though food was not in abundance, they had enough to eat, and as his children were being educated freely in the school where he was teaching, they could scrape along. He was proficient in his subject and taught other subjects too, which he said any teacher could do who was at all intelligent. He again stressed his deep interest in education.

"What is the function of a teacher?" he asked.

Is he merely a giver of information, a transmitter of knowledge?

"He has to be at least that. In any given society, boys and girls must be prepared to earn a livelihood, depending on their capacities, and so on. It is part of the function of a teacher to impart knowledge to the student so that he may have a job when the time comes, and may also, perhaps, help to bring about a better social structure. The student must be prepared to face life."

That is so, sir, but aren't we trying to find out what is the function of a teacher? Is it merely to prepare the student for a successful career? Has the teacher no greater and wider significance?

"Of course he has. For one thing, he can be an example. By the way of his life, by his conduct, attitude and outlook, he can influence and inspire the student."

Is it the function of a teacher to be an example to the student? Are there not already enough examples, heroes, leaders, without adding another to the long list? Is example the way of education? Is it not the function of education to help the student to be free, to be creative? And is there freedom in imitation, in conformity, whether outward or inward? When the student is encouraged to follow an example, is not fear sustained in a deep and subtle form? If the teacher becomes an example, does not that very example mould and twist the life of the student, and are you not then encouraging the everlasting conflict between what he is and what he should be? Is it not the function of a teacher to help the student to understand what he is?

"But the teacher must guide the student towards a better and nobler life."

To guide, you must know; but do you? What do you know? You know only what you have learnt through the screen of your prejudices, which is your conditioning as a Hindu, a Christian, or a Communist; and this form of guidance only leads to greater misery and bloodshed, as is being shown throughout the world. Is it not the function of a teacher to help the student to free himself intelligently from all these conditioning influences so that he will be able to meet life deeply and fully, without fear, without aggressive discontent? Discontent is part of intelligence, but not the easy pacification of discontent. Acquisitive discontent is soon pacified, for it pursues the well worn pattern of acquisitive action. Is it not the function of a teacher to dispel the gratifying illusion of guides, examples and leaders?

"Then at least the teacher can inspire the student to greater things."

Again, are you not approaching the problem wrongly, sir? If you as a teacher infuse thought and feeling into the student, are you not making him psychologically dependent on you? When you act as his inspiration, when he looks up to you as he would to a leader or to an ideal, surely he is depending on you. Does not dependence breed fear? And does not fear cripple intelligence?

"But if the teacher is not to be either an inspirer, an example, or a guide, then what in heaven's name is his true function?"

The moment you are none of those things what are you? What is your relationship with the student? Did you previously have any relationship with the student at all? Your relationship with him was based on an idea of what was good for him, that he ought to be this or that. You were the teacher and he was the pupil; you acted upon him, you influenced him according to your particular conditioning so, consciously or unconsciously you moulded him in your own image. But if you cease to act upon him, then he becomes important in himself, which means that you have to understand him and not demand that he should understand you or your ideals, which are phony anyway. Then you have to deal with what is and not with what should be.

Surely, when the teacher regards each student as a unique in-dividual and therefore not to be compared with any other, he is then not concerned with system or method. His sole concern is with 'helping' the student to understand the conditioning influences about him and within himself, so that he can face intelligently without fear, the complex process of living and not add more problems to the already existing mess.

"Are you not asking of the teacher a task that is far beyond him?"

If you are incapable of this, then why be a teacher? Your question has meaning only if teaching is a mere career to you, a job like any other, for I feel that nothing is impossible for the true educator.

"Commentaries on Living" II, chapter 31