

EXPLORING “SELF AWARENESS” AT IIT MADRAS

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INTRODUCTION

*śreyaś ca preyaś ca manuṣyam etaḥ
tau samparitya vivinakti dbiraḥ
śreya hi dhiro'bhīpreyaso vṛṇīte
preya mando yoga-kṣemād vṛṇīte*

– Kaṭhapaniṣad

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

This *Upaniṣadic* 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 *dbiraḥ*, 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 (*trṣṇā* 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 *śreyaḥ*. 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 *preyaḥ* 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’re doing, and why they’re 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 a good education, so that they can 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’re 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 becoming 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 lifetimes. The media also pitch in, to hail IIT students who break records in terms of salary offers. 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 (currently, radiology), with their parents more than willing to invest huge amounts on their education, in the hope of gaining a huge return on their investment.

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 *śreyah*, 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 *dhīrah*; 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 witness within our selves is reflected in the chaos that we see outside, for which we are all collectively responsible – the terrible disparity 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*.

‘SELF AWARENESS’ ?

IITians 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 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 kinds 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 life purpose 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 mis-alignment, and (iv) to take full responsibility for our inner responses and external behaviour, and thereby strive for correction and development of our potentials to their fullness. Self awareness is a powerful means to facilitate such inner transformation and development.

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 focussed 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 beings are born, by Delight they exist
and grow, to Delight they return.*

– Taittiriyaopaniṣad

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.

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. 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 *preyaḥ*, such as money and fame, cannot grant.