

[Toward Effective Teaching](#)

Category : [April/May/June 2007](#)

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EDUCATION

Toward Effective Teaching

The teacher's personal spiritual life and depth of understanding are the keys to conveying religion to youth

In the fall of 2006, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami toured South India and Malaysia. As part of his tour, he met with more than a hundred Hindu youth and adults involved in teaching programs which used a variety of approaches to impart religion and spirituality. The following summary of three programs is intended to bring out the key elements useful for others involved in teaching.

Auroville is the futuristic community founded near Pondicherry in South India to implement the spiritual teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. It is today an international collective of 2,000 dedicated people. On November 15, Bodhinatha gathered with about 20 teachers at Bharat Nivas, Auroville's India center, in a meeting arranged and chaired by Sri Ashok Chatterjee. Nearly all are Indians teaching in schools for children from the surrounding Tamil Hindu community, rather than for children of Auroville residents. These schools, supported by Auroville, follow a regular government curriculum, with the spiritual aspects tucked in as opportunities present themselves. Each teacher is closely associated with Auroville, and their personal spirituality inform their teaching approach in a most beneficial manner.

They begin each school day with a moment of silence or period of meditation. They teach what they called a "wide view " of Hinduism to the children, beginning with the concept that each one is a divine soul. They then explain that the Divine is both outside us and inside us, and that there are many ways to reach the Divine. Spirituality is also imparted through art, dance and storytelling. One teacher teaches her students a few simple Sanskrit slokas, a training with a remarkable impact. One girl's proud parents thanked the teacher, telling her, "My child is the first person in our family to ever know any Sanskrit." By knowing just this small bit

of Sanskrit, the language of worship in Hinduism, both parents and children feel more a part of the religion. In one school, the children actually built their own temple.

The area is generally poor. Several teachers remarked on the children's rough home life, from which the schools served as a refuge of harmony and simplicity. One advantage they have is being able to keep class size to just 15 or 16. They have a strict policy against corporal punishment, and the small class size allows them the personal time with a student necessary to implement benign means of behavior modification. As enlightened educators around the world have discovered, the cause of bad behavior at school often lies in a child's difficult personal situation. The Auroville teachers approach misbehavior as a teaching opportunity. One teacher told the children, "The 16 of us in this class are all one, so the problems of one of us are the problems of all of us." In this way, they involve all the children in working out difficulties of any one child. They do have to be careful with this, however, as parents do not like the children discussing their home problems at school. Such problem-solving sessions offer the best opportunity for the teachers to personally demonstrate a spiritual approach to life.

Bodhinatha asked how they deal with racial stereotypes. They explained that Auroville itself is a diverse community, with strong roots in the concept of spiritual unity. The teachers invite Auroville volunteers to the schools to expose the children to the many different cultures represented in the community. They also maintain pen pal programs and Internet chats to put the children in contact with children elsewhere in the world. The teachers asked Bodhinatha how to deal with youth between age 18 and 24, who tend to reject religion. He advised that if they get all the religious principles ingrained before that tumultuous age, the youth will eventually return to them.

In addition to the children's schools, they also run education programs for the young Tamil workers who are employed at Auroville. These schools have, the teachers said, sparked something of a Hindu renaissance in the area. For example, after the workers learned in their classes that a nearby temple was the topic of a song by Sambandar, the 7th century CE child saint, the entire community took an interest in the run-down temple. They renovated it, then located and renovated several nearby temples as well. The complex of temples is now a source of pride for the residents.

Spiritually motivated teachers provide Auroville's schools with an immense

advantage. In a standard school, there will be religious and nonreligious teachers, and the attempts to impart religion will succeed or suffer accordingly.

Chinmaya Mission Yuva Kendra

Bodhinatha's second meeting was November 26 in Chennai, with the Chinmaya Mission Yuva Kendra participants. Most of them had completed the two-year Youth Empowerment Programme of study, teaching and community service within the Mission after college. Many testified to its dramatic impact on their religious lives.

The first four months take place at an ashram under the guidance of one of the Mission swamis. In this orientation and training program, the participants are taught basic Sanskrit, chanting, bhajan and hatha yoga. They study fundamental Vedantic texts, including the Kaivalya Upanishad and Bhagavad Gita. A typical assignment is for the student to read a section of one of the texts and then explain it to the other students. Each evening, satsang is held with chanting, lectures and questions and answers with the swami. The programs were described as "youth friendly and value based." The program includes not only basic exercises such as jogging and sports, but confidence building excursions such as river rafting and bungee jumping. One girl testified, "I came into the program confused. I learned a lot about India, but even more about myself. I came to better understand the scriptures and gained a lot of self-confidence." Following the four months of training, students are sent to a Chinmaya Mission center to participate in teaching and social service for the remainder of their two years.

The Mission also runs practical workshops for youth on business, time management and how to handle stress. One program, called "karma capitalism " teaches how one can make money without making bad karma. For this they brought in successful entrepreneurs, such as Vijay Easwaran of Malaysia, to talk to the students. The students were impressed to hear first-hand how business can be conducted within a spiritual framework. Like all their sessions, these meetings with the business leaders are not a passive experience of listening to a speech, but a dynamic dialogue in which students to present their concerns and questions. "Interactive is the key, " said one student.

It was apparent that the Chinmaya Mission has achieved a certain "critical mass " in

size which allows them to run a big youth program entirely within their own structure. Similarly, other large organizations, such as BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, have enough centers, swamis and adult leaders to create complex youth programs within the organization's established structure. Individual temples, by contrast, usually don't have sufficient infrastructure to provide such a full and enriching experience for youth.

Malaysian Hindu Sangam

On December 3, Bodhinatha met with more than two dozen teachers and coordinators involved in religious programs in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The largest are run by the Malaysia Hindu Sangam, with the most innovative being the new preschool program for three- to six-year-olds. Dato Vaithilingam, MHS president, said their intent is to establish within each child a strong sense of identity as a Hindu before they enter the public school system. Once in school, the children, far outnumbered by Muslim children, find themselves in an adverse religious environment. Especially as they grow older, there is increasing pressure upon them to convert, including enticement through college scholarship programs.

Headed by Dr. Rupa, 16 temples now have preschools, utilizing 30 trained teachers. These very young children are taught religion, music, dance and Tamil language, along with the government preschool syllabus. There has been a good response from parents, with 200 children now involved and 300 expected for next year. The teachers are all volunteer women, including some single mothers. Because the programs are held in temples, the classes are not subject to Malaysian restrictions that would inhibit the teaching of religion if held elsewhere. The program has only just begun, and they intend to add ten more preschools next year.

Conclusion

A key factor in successful youth programs, whatever the model, is a shared spiritual philosophy, at least among the organizers, as seen at Auroville, and ideally including the youth also, as with Chinmaya Mission. Both organizations demonstrate the value of spiritually oriented teachers, which they are able to marshal on a significant scale, and who then conveyed religion through their own example. While the preschool program in Malaysia is excellent in concept, it is apparent that its

main limitation is finding enough like-minded, spiritually oriented people to participate. Several temples in Malaysia, for example, expressed disinterest in the preschool program because it lacks any potential to generate income for the temple.

The transmission of Hinduism from generation to generation has always been primarily through oral training, a key element of sampradaya, literally, "transmission." A sampradaya is a living stream of tradition or theology. Hinduism may even be defined as the sum total of thousands of large and small sampradayas. In Auroville and the Chinmaya Mission, one can see the power of sampradaya, as the personal commitment of each adult member to a clear spiritual tradition provides the spark resulting in successful transmission of the sacred teachings to the youth.