

Spiritual Education

by Julio Savi

A new moral education, adequate to the needs of mankind in its present stage of transition to its age of maturity, should foster the development of individuals who can contribute to constructive processes, avoid being swept aside by the destructive forces that have been released in the worlds, believe in the oneness of mankind, work to promote the welfare of all their fellow human beings in the environment in which they act – be it family, community, or nation – and preserve the subtle balance between the universal and the particular, between unity and diversity.

If these goals are to be reached, moral education should aim at developing individuals characterized by certain attributes: a particular sense of purpose, certain capabilities and spiritual qualities. Spiritual education is that aspect of moral education that aims at developing spiritual qualities, as well as such feeling and attitudes towards life – precious for any personal and collective growth – that arise from faith in God.

Knowledge and Love

The basis of spiritual education is the knowledge of God. God is not meant as an anthropomorphic entity that sits upon a throne in heaven and directs the affairs of the world, sometimes loving, sometimes wrathful. Neither is He seen as an essence that is contained in all existing things, as pantheists believe. These ideas of God belong to the past religious experience of mankind, to the age of its childhood and reflect a relatively immature capacity to understand God. Today, mankind is mature enough to accept the concept of God as the Unknowable Essence.

Although God is inaccessible in His Essence, man is able nevertheless to understand that He exists. The rational proofs of the existence of God have been discussed throughout the centuries: certainly they are decisive arguments, but as promoters of faith in God are only relatively effective. The most important way towards faith in God seems the perception of His traces throughout the universe.

A simple metaphor may help in discovering the traces of God throughout the universe: the sun shines in the sky, shedding its light on all existing things in the world. Although the light is the same, the objects reflect it according to their specific capacity: a stone reflects light in quite a different way from a mirror. God may be seen as the sun, love emanates from Him as light emanates from the sun. This love becomes manifest in the world of creation in different ways and degrees, depending on the capacities of the creatures. The power of attraction binding together the particles that form material objects is but a very simple expression, on the material level, of the spiritual reality of love. The power of growth typical of the vegetable world and the power of sense perception typical of the animal world are further expressions of the same love. These expressions of love are a necessary and inescapable consequence of natural laws and forces. But man has the capacity of recognizing this love and reflecting it – willingly and consciously – towards all creatures; he has also the power to act so as to increase or diminish the degree of his receptivity to this all-pervading love.

A man who has recognized this love in the universe and in his own self feels himself no longer as a knowing, feeling and willing creature forsaken upon a grain of dust wandering about through unbounded space. The world around is no longer threatening and awesome, unknowable and hostile. He has seen the love of God in this world and has also understood that he can become a willing and active source to

others of a love of which he himself is an object. He can express this by loving his fellow human beings.

There are several ways a man can express his love for his fellow human beings. He can love his family, his nation, his race. These expressions of love are limited and can be distorted into sources of injustice and conflict. But if a man learns how to love all humanity, he will realize the highest possible form of love, which cannot be distorted into a source of injustice and conflict. A man who is capable of expressing limitless love towards all of humanity, experiences the joy and happiness that are the fruits of living in harmony with creation; he also becomes capable of contributing to a condition of unity and harmony that cannot be created by other means, and will gain new insights into the true meaning of such moral values as honesty, justice, and compassion.

Knowledge and love – which are very often seen in many societies as two separate and conflicting aspects in human life – will grow in his heart as two strictly interconnected faculties: while he opens his heart and mind to limitless love, his thirst for knowledge of the laws and mysteries of the universe will grow, and while his knowledge increases, his capacity of loving becomes less dependent on transitory emotions and more rooted in the realities of human existence, and therefore able to withstand the changes and chances of this world.

Faith and Obedience

The interaction between love and knowledge engenders faith, which may be defined as “conscious knowledge in action.” A person, who has discovered the traces of God throughout the universe, has understood that the reality of things is love. He knows that a man has the capacity to overcome the material side of his nature, which is expressed in such emotions and behaviours as fear, hate, rage, lust, etc., and show forth instead the spiritual aspect of his nature, shown in feelings and behaviours usually defined as spiritual, i.e., courage, tolerance, love compassion, holiness, etc. indeed, he knows that every man can express love in his feelings, words, and deeds. Therefore, he has faith in his own potentialities of personal growth, in his own capacity of contributing to the progress of society. He also has faith in the potentiality of his fellow human beings, in their capacity of personal growth, in their capacity of contributing to the progress of society. This faith is a mighty spur to action, because it confirms the hope that there is always the chance for man to grow better, to amend past mistakes. Therefore, he will have faith in the possibility of building a new society, faith that life has meaning and that joy and happiness are attainable realities.

Knowledge, love and faith give a new meaning to obedience. As any other human attributes, obedience also is subject to growth. The simplest form of obedience is motivated by fear of punishment or retaliation. This kind of obedience is quite imperfect: while it may deter a person from committing overt crimes, it will not motivate him to do good deeds or develop a good character. A more mature form of obedience is motivated by a desire to live in greater harmony with the power of love and by the feeling of happiness, brought about by obedience itself, as well as by the fear that disobedience may become a cause of the loss of that love. This form of obedience involves a great sense of responsibility and the awareness that, although love is the fundamental force underlying creation, achieving harmony with that force requires the exercise of will and action. Failure to make the effort becomes its own punishment. The result is that an inner force is provided that restrains the development of one's lower nature and strengthens one's higher nature. In other words, this man, guided by love, knowledge, faith and obedience, will be able to develop those myriad virtues that comprise good character.

It is impossible here to deal with all those qualities, whose meaning and interactions need to be explored thoroughly within the process of moral education. But some of them will be, albeit superficially, discussed.

Rectitude of Conduct: Trustworthiness, Truthfulness, and Justice

Chief among the attributes of good character are trustworthiness and truthfulness. These virtues are the foundation of all the others; without them, neither individual nor social progress is possible.

Trustworthiness and truthfulness involve much more than not telling lies; they actually embody the

overarching capacity to discern, value, and uphold truth. When the ability to discern truth is impeded, clarity of thought is unattainable, and the capacity to acquire knowledge, an attribute of human perfection, is also impaired. Indeed, the progress and prosperity of a society depend on clarity of vision and on the capability of its people to perceive the truth and act in light of it. Such perception and action are the bases of scientific methods and of scientific progress.

Just as trustworthiness and truthfulness are the foundation of human progress, justice is the standard by which the individual must judge his own behaviour and the collective action of society. At the social level, the establishment of world order and the tranquility of the nations depend on justice. It is necessary for the establishment of unity and harmony at all levels of society. But it is not enough for the individual to seek to establish justice in social institutions; he must apply the same standards to his own behaviour. By their light he is able to perceive reality and truth and to obtain true knowledge. In order to practice justice, he needs to perceive its implications for his interactions with his family, his friends, and his community, and clearly recognize the justice or injustice of collective activities in which he participates. At the same time, however, the individual needs to modify justice with love and compassion, for justice that is not founded on an all-encompassing love can easily become tyranny.

However, it is important to help develop the understanding that it is insufficient to express the qualities of trustworthiness, truthfulness and justice merely through adherence to simple rules of behaviour. They must become the basis for all one's affairs and one's participation in the affairs of society. The qualities of rectitude of conduct need to be developed in conjunction with love, compassion, mercy, and generosity, so that rectitude of conduct does not become distorted into self-righteousness and disdain for the weaknesses of others.

Purity of Motive: Sanctity, Sincerity, and Radiance

At a very basic level, purity is related to cleanliness. Although "bodily cleanliness is a physical thing, it hath, nevertheless, a powerful influence on the life of the spirit. It can be compared to music: although sounds are but vibrations of the air, they move the heart. In the same way physical cleanliness in one's person and one's environment is conducive to spirituality and purity of mind. At another level, the practice of purity and sanctity requires the individual to free himself from the decadent influences of present-day society, live a chaste life, avoid alcohol, drugs and other substances that impair health, and be modest in his choice of dress, language and amusements. At yet another level, purity has implications for one's dealings with others. It requires honesty, detachment, and sincerity, fulfillment of one's promises, and diligence and faithfulness in the management of one's affairs."

These high standards should not, however, be confused with asceticism. Purity does not deny the individual his legitimate right to benefit from the joys and pleasures of the world, but rather makes it possible for him to fully appreciate them. Sincerity and purity lead to radiance of spirit and joy. Joy and radiance are, in fact, essential attributes of the human soul and not mere emotions that are experienced in response to external conditions. They are manifested by the individual who lives in harmony with his true purpose and are dependent on his obedience to moral laws. They are intimately related to the qualities of generosity, kindness, selflessness, thoughtfulness, and compassion. In exploring the implications of purity, the process of moral education must consciously cultivate joy and radiance in the individual. While it is essential for an individual to develop a critical consciousness of the corrupt practices now prevalent in society, it is important that this faculty is not distorted into cynicism that makes it difficult for him to be an enthusiastic and joyful human being. In a certain sense, the joy and radiance – exhibited by those who are served by the process of moral education – is a measure of the success of the process and an important indication that the individual's moral development is proceeding without distortion.

Trust, Confidence, and Humility: Concomitants of all Virtues

The magnitude of the challenge of developing one's qualities can have diverse effects on people. In some, it can produce a sense of hopelessness and a tendency to give up and accept defeat when the slightest difficulty is encountered. Guilt has been another reaction to the challenges of morality, and its

consequences have depressed the fortunes of individuals and sometimes of entire peoples. A central task of the moral education process, then, is to develop faith and confidence in people so that it becomes possible for them to strive with constancy and joy to manifest their higher potentialities. Confidence, however, has to be complemented with true humility. Humility, if genuine, does not lead to subservience or to passivity and inaction. The development of the qualities of confidence and humility, modified by each other, is required for the acquisition of all other virtues.

Undoubtedly, an individual possessed of such spiritual qualities can actively and fruitfully contribute to the important processes of transformation that human society is presently undergoing. He will be able to work to promote the welfare of all his fellow human beings, and to resist the destructive forces that have been released in the world, as the new morality moulds itself to the requirements of the modern world.