

Right Attitude to Education

by

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Under the theme ‘Right Attitude to Education’ what we intend discussing is not education in general, but education we receive or our own education. It is commonly accepted that receiving education is a good thing, and also that it is a must in our life. This is why children are sent to school to receive formal education from very early childhood up to their youth or sometimes, even beyond that. It is also why, not sending children to school by their parents or guardians for formal education during certain age limits is a punishable offence in many countries including Sri Lanka.

From education we get knowledge. Along with knowledge, however, it is expected that we get skills with which we can do things; and also attitudes with which we live or behave physically, verbally and mentally. The term ‘knowledge,’ nevertheless, is somewhat ambiguous – on the one hand, it means information and on the other, it means understanding. Information is something quantitative and measurable; whereas understanding is qualitative, hence, immeasurable and can be seen in one’s overall pattern of behaviour.

Knowledge in the sense of accumulating information, no doubt, is useful. In particular, in ancient days when written texts were scarce and learned people were not easy to come by, gathering information was difficult and took a long time. Hence, learned people were those who had vast reservoirs of information in their memory. Naturally those who had gathered more information were considered worthy of respect, and consequently, such people did receive respect from others. Today, even though memorization does not play a crucial role in education, still those who have

passed examinations and secured academic degrees such as BA. MA. PhD. Diploma etc. are respected in society. What could happen in this situation is that some holders of such academic qualifications become arrogant, self-promoting, and looking down upon others.

If one becomes arrogant on account of one's knowledge, it indicates that such a person has only gathered information, or has only gained factual knowledge, but not understanding. In other words, such a person has not become mature. Maturity may come even without formal education. But there is no guarantee that maturity comes always with education. The solution is not to discard education, but to get it with right attitudes, and also retain right attitudes throughout life even after the stage of one's formal education.

It is the same with skills. At the conclusion of our formal education, we may get qualified as teachers, administrators, judges, lawyers, managers, physicians, engineers, accountants, carpenters, mechanics, masons and the like, i.e. knowing *how* to do things. But if we are not equipped with right attitudes about what we are capable of doing, it is likely that we become arrogant about our skills and we misuse them.

There is even more serious situation emerging during the past few decades in the world with vast developments in information technology with which the function of information gathering is done much faster and much more accurately than ordinary human beings can do. More recently with the arrival of Artificial Intelligence (AI), described as an 'intelligent machine,' not only information is gathered but such information is sorted out, organized and presented in systematic manner, vastly reducing the need for human agency.

When all these functions are better done by machines and taken away from us, what would be the fate of human beings remains a crucial question. In such a situation in which systematic factual

knowledge and even skills are no longer exclusive to the human domain, to be human or to be worthy of being human, there is no other alternative than to cultivate understanding. This will enable us, among other things, to make use of such devices as AI, compassionately, skilfully and perhaps even more crucially, without compromising human integrity.

What is the right attitude to education and knowledge that follows? It is that knowledge and skills are for the welfare and happiness of oneself, others, and both of oneself and others. Education is not a reason to be arrogant, but is a means of giving, caring and sharing. More one becomes educated, more one should become humble. Ultimately, humility is the hallmark of being truly educated

Finally, let us also remind ourselves of a famous ancient Buddhist saying found in one of the Jatakas. It says: ***There is no worth of the learning of one who is not virtuous - sīlena anupetassa - sutenattho na vijjati***

(*Sīlavīmaṃsa-jātaka - Jātaka No. 362*).

Appamādo amatapadaṃ - pamādo maccuno padaṃ
Appamattā na mīyanti – ye pamattā yathāmata

Heedfulness is the path of immortality, heedlessness is the path to death.

Those who are heedful do not die, unlike those who are heedless, who are like unto the dead.

Etam visesato ñatvā – appamādamhi paṇḍitā
appamāde pamodanti - ariyānaṃ gocare ratā

Distinctly understanding this (difference), the wise in heedfulness,
rejoice in heedfulness, delighting in the realm of the noble ones.

Dhammapada, Appamāda Vagga, vv. 1 & 2