

Education, Ethics, Freedom

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It is said that those who truly experience freedom are people who can exercise their own choices and go against the flow. Countries gain freedom from colonial powers only to be under the oppression of dictators. People gain freedom from their bosses to start-up their own enterprises and come under the control of competition, corrupt officials and unscrupulous customers. Youngsters start earning and gain freedom from their parents, only to fall prey to unreasonable targets, nasty bosses, and the iron grip of huge EMIs that drain away their earning.

Education has fetters of its own. Unlike the street urchins who roam freely and learn wide range of life skills, most 'privileged' children are caught for years and years in the rigmarole of classes, homework and exams – often missing out on learning skills that would have given them the freedom to give their own direction to life.

Seventy years after we as a nation attained total independence from colonial rule, it is time to introspect what the freedom has done for us. We pride ourselves on being one of the very few countries that fought for freedom with non-violence and satyagraha as our guiding principles. We acknowledge that the British did bring some progress and learning into our lives and society, and do not harp on the oppression or deprivation we had to undergo in their rule. We simply asked them to go with dignity, to

'part as friends', and thanks to innumerable self-sacrificing leaders from Mahatma Gandhi downwards, we achieved the impossible – total freedom as a democratic and secular nation.

We have also achieved immense economic freedom over the years. The standard of living of the common man has significantly enhanced, poverty has been reduced, and comforts that were out of reach of the common man are now quite affordable. Every youth, educated or semi-educated, can look forward to earnings that his forefathers could never have dreamt of. With such major strides forward and with such exemplary progress, why are we not as happy as we should have been?

Mahatma Gandhi said that India is not a poor country; there is enough for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed. Material progress and free availability of luxuries lead to greedy thoughts. A person who was happy with his daily bread has now started earning beyond and develops thoughts on hoarding – from items of daily needs to resources that last us beyond a lifetime. Once upon a time a household used to cook just enough food for the day, and any left-overs were promptly given to the homeless or the wandering sages. Today every family has a refrigerator and even deep-freezer. More food is cooked and stored, sometimes until it becomes too stale and has to be thrown away. On the flip side, many homes

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have idle kitchens, and food is ordered to be 'guaranteed' delivery within X minutes. Quite often there is surplus food which is wasted.

True Freedom is defined by a state where a person can rise above his wants and live with bare necessities, and yet enjoy life to its fullest. It is also directly connected to a clear conscience – when a person knows that he is constantly upholding to the highest of ethics as he views them. This can happen when an individual does not feel compelled to follow the herd mentality, when he can swim against the tide if needed, and does not feel obliged to succumb to peer pressure. This is difficult to achieve, and many have not come even close to it – but it is definitely not impossible. And the rewards are not only enormous, they are permanent.

To attain this state of bliss and independence, one needs to start with the young generation. It is said that the country or society which has the most promising future is not one with oil reserves or technological acumen or military power, but one in which the current generation takes good care of the upcoming generation. Every parent wants his child to get a good education, but few understand the essence of 'good education.' In a system totally enveloped with completing portions, learning-by-rote, and scoring the crucial extra marks in exams, it is a Herculean task to bring about a transformation (because change is not enough, we can slip back soon). Yet it can be achieved if each one of us takes up our responsibility and tasks based on our abilities and influence. We need to be guided by the Serenity prayer that says, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Each one of us can contribute towards achieving this freedom. Here are a few practical steps:

1. Be a role model to the youngsters under your influence. Walk your talk and talk your talk. Let them get inspired by seeing you in action.
2. Define ethics, values and principles in simple terms without sermonizing. Answer their questions, clear their doubts, and NEVER seek short-cuts to cover falsehood. Be courageous enough to admit where things are wrong, and brainstorm on how even minor changes can be brought about.
3. Teach 'delayed gratification,' the ability to work consistently and patiently towards important goals, and then enjoy the fruits on a long term basis. Help them cope with minor disappointments and setbacks.
4. Teach them that addiction of any form is the antithesis of freedom. Addiction to alcohol, drugs, social media, gaming, pornography, excessive work (workaholism), or even to a person (emotional dependency on a relationship) are the biggest barriers for a person to seek a path of independence and fulfillment. There are many successful means of preventing addiction which cannot be fully elaborated here, but suffice it to say that loneliness, low self-esteem, monotony boredom, desiring short-cuts or obsession with becoming better than others are the major areas to be cautious about that can lead to any of the above addictions.
5. Connecting education, lessons and studies to reality and how it can enhance quality of life is another strong motivator towards principled living. While we as individuals may not be able to bring about significant changes in the education system, we can

certainly supplement it by infusing value based lessons.

Freedom cannot be taught, it has to be experienced. An individual moves out from a comfortable rented house to his own smaller house – and he understands and relishes the freedom of doing anything to his house, living the way he wants, painting, adding or breaking down walls, and thrilled at the prospect that no one can ask him to leave. In the same manner, young people caught in the rat race of scoring

more marks, seeking the ‘best’ colleges or courses, getting the best campus placement and getting into the drudgery of a highly-paid 24/7 monotonous job, need to actually experience that there is a world outside the 6-inch screen of the smart-phone and 17 inch screen of the laptop. It is up to us mentors to lead them on gently to this wide unfettered world “where the mind is without fear and the head is held high...” Then we would have truly attained freedom.



Mahatma Gandhi on ETHICS

Moral strength is supreme. The ancient Greeks had greater intelligence than the European of today, but when the former gave up morality, their intelligence became their enemy, and no trace of them remain today.

What Is Moral Action

Moral act must be our own act: it must spring from our own will. If we act mechanically, there is no moral content in our act. Such action would be moral, if we think it proper to act like a machine and do so. For in doing so, we use our discrimination. We should bear in mind the distinction between action mechanically and acting intentionally. It may be moral of a king to pardon a culprit. But the messenger bearing the order of

pardon plays only a mechanical part in the king's moral act. But if the messenger were to bear the king's order, considering it to be his duty, his action would be a moral one. How can a man understand morality who does not understand his own intelligence and power of thought, but lets himself be swept along like a log of wood by a current? Some time a man defies convention and acts on his own with a vie to [doing] absolute good.