Aspects of learning in Hindu philosophy

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Abstract

Hindu philosophy is one of the world’s oldest doctrines and it is closely linked to core religious texts of the Vedas originating in ancient India. In Sanskrit veda means ‘knowledge’. It is both a rich and complex religion and could be viewed as a holistic human experience towards the ultimate state of self-realization and liberation. The body of literature on learning and learning theories, however, has primarily been viewed from a Western perspective. In a more globalized world, the interactions of different philosophical systems in a variety of contexts affect individuals, organizations and societies in so many ways. This article explores some of the key epistemological concepts and practices of learning in Hindu philosophy. It is hoped that the analysis will prompt deeper interest and research in Eastern philosophical traditions and further cross-cultural understanding of learning. In this paper, the use of the term Hindu-Indian is associated with the philosophical, religious and cultural system of India.

Introduction

When we look at learning we tend to look at the models that were developed in the West. Some in the West have been concerned that something is missing from standard Western approaches to learning. It may be timely to consider and explore the alternative approaches to learning from Eastern traditions that predate Western philosophical thought. I would like to commence my discussion by greeting you with Namaste – I bow to the divine in you, a traditional Hindu gesture of salutation that carries with it both spiritual and symbolic meanings. It is accompanied with the action of head bowed and palms held together in front of the chest. Namas means ‘to bow’ and ‘te’ means ‘you’. It is an acknowledgement of the Life Force–Divinity that resides within all of Us. Understanding the meaning of this action enables us to have a deeper respect for the sacredness and equality of all.

Hinduism was first introduced to the West in the United States of America at the World’s Parliament of Religions by Swami Vivekananda in 1893. In his speech, among other things, he mentioned that he was ‘proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance’ and the recognition of ‘all religions as true’ (Vivekananda, 1893). Learning seen as the quest for truth from the Western philosophical perspective tends to be in practice an intellectual endeavour. Sharma (2003: 13) notes that:
Indian Philosophy has been, however, intensely spiritual and has always emphasized the need of practical realization of truth. The word ‘darshana’ means ‘vision’ and also the ‘instrument of vision’. It stands for the direct, immediate and intuitive vision of Reality, the actual perception of Truth, and also includes the means which lead to this realization.

Hinduism can be seen as taking ‘a holistic approach in understanding behavior. Individuals, organisations, society, the universe, and the cosmos are all interrelated and integrated’ (Ashok and Thimmappa, 2006: 329). Chattopadhyaya (2005: 13–14) points out that:

Indian philosophy was not necessarily metaphysical or religious. In the broad spectrum of Indian traditions there were many systems, which exhibit naturalism, materialism and hedonism … a more important point to be remembered in today’s context is that even some of the mainstream Indian thoughts like Śāṅkhyā (the philosophy of Number), Vaiśeṣika (the philosophy of Particularism or Atomism) and Yoga, in their earliest formulations are found to be secular, i.e. had nothing to do with God.

And one of the paths to self-realization is through yoga (which generally means ‘to unite’), where the practice of it is seen as being in union with the cosmos. We are the microcosmos and, through yoga, we realize our unity with the macrocosm or the universe as a whole (Chattopadhyaya, 2005). We can therefore surmise, as Bhatt (2005: 38) puts it, that philosophizing in India:

stems from concrete experiences and ends in the realization of the summum bonum of all experiences. It may be conducted in an āśrama, in the forest, in the battle-field, in the court of a king or in a laboratory or at any congenial place. It may begin with wonder or doubt or inquisitiveness or problem-solving or any other motivation, but its ultimate concern has been redemption from imperfection (mṛtyu) of the empirical existence and consequent suffering (duḥkha). This is characterized as mokṣa, a state of absolute peace or absolute bliss, and named variously as mukti, apavarga, niḥśreyaya, nirvāṇa, etc., depending upon the philosophical disposition of the seeker.

Of late, there has been a heightened interest towards non-Western views of learning which could be due in part to a globalized world that is interconnected and where people are more mobile. A shift is also taking place in the world order – from the West to the East, where a majority of people are living with their rich ancient civilization and traditions of learning. This would naturally affect the way in which we perceive, think and interact with one another. This may lead to, in some instances, opportunities for deeper understanding and learning or, on the other hand, exclusiveness that widens the gap for real learning and growth to take place. For example, Jarvis (2009: 11) in his recent book on Learning to be a person in society contends that:

people no longer live in a single cultural society: they live in life-worlds which consist of a unique combination of cultural practices, depending on where people live and on their social position … . Society is a combination of systems and life-worlds and the life-world is multicultural.

Hence, our world of life is related to practical living and learning, which ‘is about action in a pragmatic manner in order to achieve certain goals and behaviours … for the most part we are dealing with practical knowledge and utilizing our own experience’ (Jarvis, 2009: 12). Others looked at adult learning in the workplace from different worldviews to increase understanding and praxis, the use of a holistic approach of cross-cultural motivation in a globalized world and exploring spirituality and leadership and the effects that these have on organizational learning (Dent, Higgins and Wharff, 2005; Johansen and McLean, 2006; Merriam and Young, 2008; Vora, 2002). The differences we see in theory and practice relating to the Western model of learning emphasize ‘the split between mind and body whereas many other cultural
traditions of learning involve more somatic and spiritual aspects. In contrast, the non-Western perspectives put greater emphasis on interdependent, communal, holistic, and informal learning’ (Phillips and Vaughn, 2009: 52). What are some of these concepts and aspects of learning in Hindu philosophy? And, how are these applied in practice? The ensuing discussion will explore some key epistemological concepts and practices of learning.

**View of self as continuously learning and performing**

Learning in Hindu philosophy is a lifelong process that is embedded in principles, values and experiences in the nature of living and of human existence. The values include ‘all possible forms – physical, intellectual, aesthetic, moral and spiritual’ (Kumar, 2005: 145). Kumar points out that:

> the perennial quest for the highest goal of life is the most pervasive feature of Indian mode of thinking. It is a unique concept which is unparalleled in the history of world thought and is the greatest original contribution of Indian philosophy to it [and where] right from the Vedic period, intricate questioning and profound pursuit on the part of the seeker can be noticed for finding an answer to the important questions: Who Am I? What is the highest goal of my life? …

Part of the process of learning involves that of making meaning of who we are and what our purpose or mission in life is. Tisdell (2001) for example, notes that, to disregard the spiritual perspective ‘in how it relates to teaching for personal and social transformation, is to ignore an important aspect of human experience and avenue of learning and meaning-making’ (p. 4). Our learnings and the knowledge we acquire are embedded in where we live and interact – our cultural and ‘spiritual’ education. In Hindu philosophy, learning tends to take a holistic self-discovery process where our lives are interconnected and related to one another and beyond, all of us originate from one source, that of Brahman (the Absolute) – some may call it the Ultimate Power, Energy, Divine Force, Truth, or God, among others.

Phillips and Vaughn (2009: 53) summarize that:

> the Hindu perspective on learning emphasizes spiritual growth and a connection of the mind and body. Oral tradition is a common method of teaching and starts early with storytelling to children … the objective of Hindu learning is to understand oneself first through self-discovery and then to progress to a more holistic understanding of the universe which includes the idea of connection to the universe. Such an approach to learning allows the Hindu learner to access knowledge through various modalities (e.g. stories, meditation, music, etc.) which in turn may result in a higher level of spirituality. Like Confucian learning, there is a sacred and revered relationship between teacher and learner in the Hindu tradition of learning.

The process of *to be* and ultimately self-realization through continuous learning and practice appears at the heart of Hindu philosophy. One of the ways of understanding the concept is through the three steps of learning.

The Vedic text outlines the process of learning through three stages. They are Sravana (listening), Manana (thinking) and Nidhidhyasana (meditating) – for the purpose of attaining the knowledge of Brahman. Siddiqui (2008) translated these from an educational perspective, as: intake of knowledge, reflecting on the knowledge and putting the knowledge into practice, respectively.

We could view the process as a virtuous cycle as shown in Figure 49.1. Seen from the traditional perspective, the first step involves listening to the sacred scriptures. During the vedic period, for example, the sacred texts were transmitted through word of mouth. Siddiqui (2008: 53) explains that, in the first step, it is important to:
expose ourselves regularly to the knowledge. This can be through reading books on Vedanta or listening to or watching lectures on Vedanta. This stage is important because we are ultimately a function of the inputs we feed to ourselves. Just as the body is a function of the food that is ingested, the mind too is a function of the thoughts it is exposed to. It is important that we think about what we read or hear and this is where the next step of the learning process begins.

The term ‘Vedanta’ literally means ‘the end of the Veda’ and refers to the concluding portions of the Vedas which describe the Ultimate Reality. The Guru (teacher) in this instance acts as the facilitator, allowing and enabling the student’s mind to experience directly the reality.

In the second stage, Manana, we need to reflect deeply on the spiritual texts that we have read.

The recommended time for the reflection on Vedantic knowledge is from 4am to 6am. This period is called brahmamuhurta. It is the ideal time for absorbing and questioning the subtle concepts put forth in Vedanta. This is because the mind is not disturbed by the hustle and bustle of the day just yet. It is fresh from a good night’s sleep and free from other thoughts. It is also acknowledged as the time when the sattvika content in us manifests itself. A combination of these factors makes the early morning reflection most fruitful (Siddiqui, 2008: 53)

Sattvika could be seen as the attributes of the universe and self that compose mind and body, consciousness, or intelligence and that are characterized by equilibrium, where one is not attached to external sense-objects.

In the last stage, Nididhyasana, we deepen and internalize even more by meditating on the truths and images that were previously reflected upon. Nididhyasana (meditation) means to go beyond rational

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**Figure 49.1 Three-stage process of learning**

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thought, thereby realizing the essence of those truths or images. Adi Shankara (an Indian philosopher who summarized the entire doctrine of Advaita Vedanta [non-dualistic philosophy]), described the fruit of these three steps as ‘nirvikalpa samadhi’ (state of ecstatic non-dual awareness) and ‘nirvana’ (liberation of individual existence). Siddiqui (2008) notes that ‘this is the most important stage of the learning process. True knowledge is what we are able to integrate in our day-to-day lives’ (p. 54). These three stages appear in different forms and along with a variety of other methods in Hindu philosophy, such as in the practice of yoga, in spiritual studies, for the promotion of physical, psychological and spiritual learning and performance, and the total well-being of a person. This brings us to the development of holistic learning and education, and the theories and practices associated with it.

**Holistic learning**

All of your scholarship, all your study of Shakespeare and Wordsworth would be vain if at the same time you did not build your character and attain mastery over your thoughts and your actions. 

*Mahatma Gandhi (in Attenborough, 2008: 9)*

The thoughts that we have in our mind would influence our action and learning functions in the attainment of our goals. Goals have a cause and effect relationship. The building of character involves a multitude of senses integrated in a holistic manner. Bhatt (2005: 45) contends that:

> there are other factors contributing to the effectuation of the action. There is causal collocation in which the human being is one of the factors, albeit, a dominant one. The consequences of action are not confined to that human being only. He is not the sole agent and the sole enjoyer. The consequences are experienced by the total cosmos. Anything that happens in one part of the cosmos affects the rest.

The cause and effect of our actions have an effect over time on the totality of the system we live in and share with others.

A more holistic or integrated education offers a sustainable proposition for societies and the world for the development of their human resources in an optimal and balanced way. This takes into account all the intelligences, with ability to learn how to learn, and with a curriculum that is systemic and interdisciplinary in nature and application that stretches the person to her or his fullest potential. Joshi (2005) puts forth the need for a new type of education that is both comprehensive, specialized or varied to the individual. This is due to ‘an unparalleled width and depth of inquiry’, where the ‘modern human personality has become, as never before, subject to psychological turmoil, imposing a new dimension in education that still remains undefined and insufficiently explored’, and a ‘greater quest all over the world for the synthesis of knowledge and culture’ (p. 21).

Learning does not happen in isolation. For example, we find ourselves affected by global changes, although we may be thousands of kilometers away. As a result of the increase in intensity of globalization and technology, we observe and feel the effects, one of which is a polarization of human experiences both within societies and across international boundaries. Jarvis (2009) says that learning occurs as a result of our disjunction, put simply it is a result of disharmony between us and the world, a gap, a state of ignorance that drives us to seek answers to fundamental questions. Holistic education and learning prepares us for integrating and contextualizing the differences in our ideologies. There are and have been many eminent Indian educators, thinkers, spiritual teachers and philosophers, who had dwelt on subjects relating to ontology, the acquisition of knowledge, intelligence, mind, the theory and practice of education and much more. Sri Aurobindo’s (1872–1950) thoughts on the integration of body, mind and spirit looked at the concept and practice of wholeness and he was considered a pioneer in integral education. He was a yogi, philosopher, nationalist, educator, explorer, etc. His theoretical and philosophical foundations were in part a mirror of the life in India, and of Hindu Philosophy. On education, he:
formulated a theory that could, with some variations, be adapted to all the nations of the world, fostering the growth of the integral consciousness in every pupil and bringing back to legitimate authority of the Spirit over a matter fully developed and utilised.

(Raina, 2000: 1–2)

His fundamental aims of education are deeply rooted in the spirit of Humanism for self-perfection and harmony. He states that:

Everyone has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of perfection and strength in however small a sphere which God offers him to take or refuse. The task is to find it, develop it & use it. The chief aim of education should be to help the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use.

(Ghose and Das, 2000: 215)

The three fundamental principles of true teaching in the words of Sri Aurobindo were first, ‘that nothing can be taught’, second, ‘that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth’ and third, ‘to work from the near to the far, from that which is to that which shall be’. The teacher is seen as a guide and facilitator of learning, process driven, rather than by content per se. The growth of the mind is based on the nature of the development of the child, rather than forced into shape by the teacher. Education should commence from direct experience, and increase it in depth and breadth over time. In this instance:

integrality of education is conceived as a process of organic growth, and the way in which various faculties could be developed and integrated is dependent upon each child’s inclination, rhythm of progression and law of development, Swabhava (inherent disposition) and Swadharma (inner nature). Integral education is not conceived as a juxtaposition of a number of subjects and even juxtaposition of varieties of faculties. The idea is to provide facilities for varieties of faculties, varieties of subjects and various combinations of pursuits of Knowledge, Power, Harmony and Skill in works.

(Raina, 2000: 3)

Sri Aurobindo, along with his partner The Mother, developed comprehensive theories and practices in integral education, in areas such as strengthening the body and mind through the study of science and technology; the five principal aspects of integral education – the physical, vital, mental, psychic and the spiritual; and the four major aspects of truth, namely, love, knowledge, power and beauty, including measures for achieving the goals of integral education (Ravi, 2011; The Mother, 2002). In the case of the study of the mind (anathakanana) for example, he identified four layers that the educator needs to be cognizant of, citta (store house of memory), manas (mind proper, regarded as sixth sense), buddhi (intellect) and intuition (direct vision of knowledge). With regards to the fourth layer, intuition, Raina (2000: 4) quotes Sri Aurobindo as saying that:

the powers peculiar to this highest stratum of knowledge are chiefly known to us from the phenomena of genius … direct vision of knowledge to an extent often amounting to revelation, making a man a prophet of truth. These powers are rare in their higher development, though many possess them imperfectly or by flashes. They are still distrusted by the critical reason of mankind because of the admixture of error, caprice and a biased imagination which obstructs and distorts their perfect workings. Yet it is clear that humanity could not have advanced to its present stage if it had not been for the help of these faculties, and it is a question with which educationists have not yet grappled, what is to be done with this mighty and baffling element, the element of genius in the pupil. The mere instructor does his best to discourage and stifle genius, the more liberal teacher welcomes it.
One of the ground-breaking reports from UNESCO (The Delors Report, 1996) highlighted basic principles that lifelong learning and education contribute towards the holistic development of a person—the mind, body, intelligence, aesthetic appreciation, spirituality and other areas. The four pillars of education were: Learning to know, Learning to do, Learning to live together and with others and Learning to be. Jarvis (2009: 86) argues that there should be a fifth pillar, that of:

learning to care for the environment. Because of the threats of global warming, we have become much more conscious of the significance of caring for the planet . . . In this a major factor is the earth, which needs to be cared for in a way that humankind has not done.

From the Hindu philosophical tradition, environmental well-being is intertwined with that of individual well-being.

They strive for the purity of the intellect (dhū or prajñā or vigñāna), mind (mana), vitality (pāṇa) and physic (amma) all together. The Vedic seers prayed for the health of all these four environments in their diverse forms and facets. All these are regarded by them as distinct but not separate as they have their source and sustenance in ‘That one’ names as ‘Purusa’ or ‘Brahman’.

(Bhatt, 2005: 49)

Each of these are inter-connected and dependent on each other. Hence, Bhatt (2005: 50) contends that:

what is needed is creating environmental awareness or consciousness and inculcation of the spirit of responsibility and accountability in our relation with nature. A sustainable development, leading to more and more perfection, stands in need of environmental stewardship. Environmental stewardship implies a sense of mutual care to be spearheaded by human beings only. If we care for nature, nature will care for us. This is a corollary of the famous dictum, ‘Dharmo rakṣati rakṣitah’. What is required is not the attitude of consumerism and reckless use of material resources, domination over exploitation of nature, but responsible use, equitable distribution and preservation of the splendors of nature (vasudhā).

Dharmo rakṣati rakṣitah means that, if you hold on to dharma throughout, the very same dharma will protect you. Dharma has several meanings, but generally we can look at it as the natural state or condition of beings and things, being righteous, sustaining and supporting the eternal values of life and characteristics that hold the truth for the totality of our existence in the universe.

Capitalism and a world of instant gratification takes precedence over the need to respect and preserve nature and to deconstruct ourselves from the attachment of desires and attain peace of mind.

The present day ethics and ethical practices are too man-centered to recognise the ‘reverse relationship’ between nature and man, to posit a relationship of mutuality between man and the rest of the creation. To use another terminology of the Bhagavadgītā … the human being has to cultivate the attitude of ‘yoga-kṣem’ towards nature and the rest of the cosmos. Then only we can meet the needs of the present and future generations by a developmental process that is really sustainable and progressive.

(Bhatt, 2005: 50)

Learning to care for the environment has been part of Hindu philosophy. Hindu philosophy was created from the forests where the Hindu seers:

lived in complete harmony and meditated in the peace and serenity of the woods, to give us the supernal values and ideals through our ancient scriptures, the Vedas and Upanishads. Their ashrams were an epitome of man living in close communion with nature, with the trees, birds and animals.

(Kumar, 2003: 53)
Menon (2006: 12) explains further that:

nature was the intimate setting for the Vedic people to do their ‘science’ and experiments in the wilderness. Knowledge, its origin and nature, dominates several discussions in the Upanishadic literature. This trend continues in the other schools of Hindu philosophy as well. But what unites the Vedic, Upanishadic, and classical schools of Indian thought in their concept of knowledge is that equal importance is given to a scientific pursuit of the knowledge of the ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ worlds. The outer and the inner are seen as twin realities of life, and progress for the Vedic people depended on how well they could include each other. On one side, the Hindus presented pioneering findings in the field of physical sciences – the outer – such as astronomy, mathematics, chemistry, medicine, and metallurgy – and on the other they developed – the inner – a wisdom tradition. The Hindu ideals of love, compassion, and personal well-being make avenues for ‘material’ developments to meet with ‘spiritual’ progress in a common space for optimal development of the person.

Conclusion

Learning as seen in Hindu philosophy is a living process. A process that begins with the individual and takes into account ‘others’– communities, organizations, societies the world and the universe as a whole. Menon (2006: 11) sums it up well that:

the Hindu mind conceives pluralism as a method for thinking and experiencing the multidimensionality of reality. Indian epistemology and metaphysics are rich sources of the thinking-experiencing paradigm. Philosophy according to the Hindu view cannot be an alienated rational process, though much discussion goes into theories of knowledge. Why Hindu philosophy is primarily a wisdom tradition is explained by its idea of identity between knowledge and existence, cit and sat. Many dimensions of Truth, many ways of knowing it, and many modes of being it, are built into the Hindu psyche. Ethical priorities, logical efficacies, and metaphysical theories are all finally supposed to lead to a way of living, and transformation of attitudes, approaches, and experiences.

The concepts we had discussed of an individual who is continuously learning and performing affects the way in which groups, organizations, societies and nations interact and learn from one another. The aspects of learning to be, to know, to do, to live together and with others, and to care for the environment could represent a living movement that reconnects Western learning with the more integrated, holistic approach to education from Eastern traditions. Learning is at the core of our being, and how we transition through and manage the unknowns to the knowns, of what we do and our relationship with ‘others’ will create the kind of world that we want to have for ourselves and our children.

Notes

1 The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not in any way represent the organization.
2 Attempt was made as far as possible in translations to find appropriate wording for the original text; however, it should be noted that no single English word may fully capture the essence of the original meaning and nuances.

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