



FUTURE SCHOOL

Circular 2

For Teachers, Staff and Friends

24/08/2023

Imagination and Education

What is imagination and why is it important?

*“Imagination is the power of conceiving things beyond the ordinary experience of life.”*¹ Sri Aurobindo.

Ideas that are conjured by the imagination sometimes refuse to leave us: They “persist in the human mind.” When they do, they gain a power that gives them the potential to manifest. Sri Aurobindo gave the example of “travel in the air,” that once radical obsession of Leonardo Da Vinci, the renaissance master whose genius Mother associated with Sri Aurobindo’s. When Da Vinci dreamt of flight it was “beyond the ordinary experience of life.” But the power of the dream demanded realisation. And so it came to pass. If the imagination of one man can be a powerful agent to bring something into creation, then its power is amplified if it is shared by others. A collective imagination, something wished for by many people, will always have the possibility of receiving God’s blessing. To use Sri Aurobindo’s words, it can draw “the sanction of the cosmic Will.”² The key point is that “imagination can create their own potentiality:”³ They can create what they conceive, whether that be heaven or hell.

Because of the creative power of imagination, Sri Aurobindo’s comments invite us to consider what are the highest aspirations our imaginations can nurture. Mother considered this critical. Because of it, she urged that education should help develop a child’s “thirst for the marvellous, for what seems unrealisable, for something which fills you with the feeling of

¹ Sri Aurobindo, Evening Talks, 11 November 1923

² “Imaginations that persist in the human mind, like the idea of travel in the air, end often by self-fulfilment; individual thought-formations can actualise themselves if there is sufficient strength in the formation or in the mind that forms it. Imaginations can create their own potentiality, especially if they are supported in the collective mind, and may in the long run draw on themselves the sanction of the cosmic Will.” CWSA, Vol 21-22, The Life Divine, p 452

³ CWSA, Vol 21-22, The Life Divine, p 452

divinity...”⁴. Separately, she mused, “I have always felt that if one didn’t have the capacity of imagination he would not make any progress.”⁵ The importance of nurturing this faculty in integral education is therefore clear.

Imagination as an aspect of Mental Education

*“Education to be complete must have five principal aspects corresponding to the five principal activities of the human being: the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the spiritual.”*⁶ The Mother.

Amongst the five principal aspects of education that Mother identified, where does imagination sit? And how important a place does it occupy within the principal aspect of education selected? It clearly has a role in all five aspects of education identified by Mother. To give an example, athletes can perform with inventive genius: Imagination must have a role in physical education (what Mother called the “education of the body”⁷). But physical education is not the first association with this faculty that occurs to us. That is because ordinarily its genesis is in the mind. Imagination has its domain principally within mental education. To see why this is the case, we need to consider the nature of intellectual activity, the process of thinking.

Imagination as an aspect of Intellectual Activity

Sri Aurobindo said intellectual activity had two aspects:

1. The first aspect of intellectual activity was concerned with developing critical and analytical faculties. Sciences were excellent at this.
2. The second aspect concerned imagination.⁸ “Art, poetry, music, literature and the sympathetic study of man and his creations,” helped the development of this faculty.⁹

Imagination compliments critical thinking

Critical thinking on one side, imagination on the other; both have played crucial parts in history. People lose sight of this at times. On several occasions, Sri Aurobindo commented on society’s tendency to depreciate intellectual activities other than those that had practical application for humanity.¹⁰ The flaw in this approach provided, in part, the starting point of his magnum opus, *The Life Divine*.¹¹ Within Education, this approach has, at times resulted in society’s promotion of certain subjects with inadequate reflection on the holistic needs of

⁴ CWM Vol 10, p 162

⁵ CWM Vol 7, p 229

⁶ CWM Vol 12, On Education, p 9

⁷ CWM Vol 12, On Education, p 12

⁸ CSWA, Vol 1, The National Value of Art, p449

⁹ CSWA, Vol 1, The National Value of Art, p449

¹⁰ “Of these science, philosophy and criticism have established their use to the mass of humanity by ministering to the luxury, comfort and convenience which all men desire and arming them with justification in the confused struggle of passions, interests, cravings and aspirations which are now working with solvent and corrosive effect throughout the world. The value of the other side, more subtle and profound, has been clouded to the mass of men by the less visible and sensational character of its workings.”: CSWA, Vol 1, The National Value of Art, p437.

¹¹ “...today we see a humanity satiated but not satisfied by victorious analysis of the externalities of Nature preparing to return to its primeval longings:” CWSA Vol 21-22, *The Life Divine*, p3-p4

the child.¹² It was this that prompted a wry observation by Pavitra, the former Director of the Ashram school that Mother personally appointed. He said, “by the need of society is meant what society thinks it needs.”¹³ The implication of Pavitra’s comment was that society sometimes lacks the dispassionate perspective (or the spiritual attribute of Equality) that can lead to an understanding of what its needs truly are.

A point that Sri Aurobindo and Mother both stressed was that the two types of intellectual activity complimented each. It was a false dichotomy to say imagination had to be sacrificed to critical reason, art to science. In 1923, Sri Aurobindo said, “Even in the case of scientists you find they have a very strong imagination.”¹⁴ In 1955, Mother echoed his words saying that scientists had to have “a lot” of imagination “otherwise they would never discover anything.”¹⁵

To understand the significance Mother gave to imagination, and the areas of study necessary to develop it, one may read *A Dream*, an invocation of the ideal society which Auroville aspires to be. It says: “Beauty in all its artistic forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature, would be equally accessible to all; the ability to share in the joy it brings would be limited only by the capacities of each one and not by social or financial position.”¹⁶

Imagining the beautiful

If imagination can create what it conceives, then it should be trained on the beautiful and the noble, to facilitate their manifestation. Nothing should be outside the scope of the artistic eye. The most ordinary of things should be made as beautifully as possible. “It is necessary that those who create, whether in great things or small, whether in the unusual masterpieces of art and genius or in the small common things of use that surround a man’s daily life, should be habituated to produce...the beautiful in preference to the ugly....”¹⁷ The aim is to ultimately have imagination act as a catalyst for the expression of nothing less than divinity.¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo would come to say that a cultivation of a love of beauty in all things, whether that be “in food, in things, in articles of use and articles of pleasure...[has]...done more than anything else to raise man from the beast.”¹⁹ This is why the love of beauty needs to be nurtured in schools and life generally.

¹² In an early essay set of essays, *On Education*, Sri Aurobindo said this: “In civilised countries a general desire for knowledge as a motive for education does exist but it is largely accompanied with the earthier feeling that knowledge is necessary to keep up one’s position in society or to succeed in certain lucrative or respectable pursuits & professions. We in India have become so barbarous that we send our children to school with the grossest utilitarian motives unmixed with any disinterested desire for knowledge... make the education good, thorough & interesting and the love of knowledge will of itself awake in the mind and so mingle with & modify more selfish objects:” *CWSA Vol 1, Early Cultural Writings*.

¹³ *Education and The Aim of Human Life* (6th Ed, 2014), p6

¹⁴ Evening Talk of 11 November 1923

¹⁵ *CWM Vol 7*, p229-230

¹⁶ *CWM Vol 12, On Education, A Dream*, p 93

¹⁷ *CSWA, Vol 1, The National Value of Art*, p453

¹⁸ For example, Sri Aurobindo said, “Beauty for beauty’s sake can never be the spirit of art in India, beauty we must seek and always beauty, but never lose sight of the end which India holds more important, the realisation of the Self in things....India has always sought to go deeper within and create out of the Power behind imagination, by passivity and plenary inspiration, in Yoga, from Samadhi.” *CWSA, Vol 1, Two Pictures*, p 459.

¹⁹ *CSWA, Vol 1, The National Value of Art*, p439

Imagination: Points to consider

Mother and Sri Aurobindo have provided a wealth of commentary on imagination. None of it is capable of prescriptive implementation. Everything they have said draws the teacher back to the fundamental consideration of what is the need of the child. To assist reflection here several points (from what has already been considered) have been listed:

1. Sri Aurobindo said "...Every child has the gift of imitation and a touch of imaginative power. Use it to give him the groundwork of the faculty of the artist."²⁰ Speaking specifically about the study of history, he encouraged, at least as an introduction to historical subjects, "the living and human parts of his nation's history..., those that focused on the "interesting narrative" and "heroic deed".²¹
2. "Instead of stupid and dry spelling and reading books [the student] should be introduced by rapidly progressive stages to the most interesting parts of his own literature and the life around him..."²² Sri Aurobindo
3. All students should be exposed to art. "It is necessary that every man should have his artistic faculty developed, his taste trained, his sense of beauty ... made...sensitive."²³ Sri Aurobindo
4. Sri Aurobindo would say that a love of beauty "in food, in things, in articles of use and articles of pleasure"²⁴ should be encouraged.
5. Imaginative work and art should be done with discipline and rigour. Sri Aurobindo said that "to be a real artist needs hard work for years...".²⁵ In so saying, he was quoting Mother. Separately, Mother emphasised the importance of concentration and the importance of teaching people the joy of doing something well, with care and skill regardless of "whether it is intellectual, artistic or manual work, and above all, the dignity of all work, whatever it may be..."²⁶
6. Mother said, "the more optimistic your imagination, the greater the chance of your realising your aim.... Therefore I say to you never be dejected and disappointed but let your imagination be always hopeful..."²⁷ She spoke of the need to encourage in education "the tendency to thirst for the marvellous, for what seems unrealisable, for something which fills you with the feeling of divinity."²⁸
7. Mother saw no contradiction between thirsting for the marvellous and what seemed unrealisable and encouraging in students scientific rigour, "sincere observation in the perception of the world as it is, the suppression of all imagination, a constant control, a highly practical and meticulous sense for exact details."

²⁰ CWSA, Vol 1, p394-395

²¹ . "Every child is a lover of interesting narrative, a hero-worshipper and a patriot. Appeal to these qualities in him and through them let him master without knowing it the living and human parts of his nation's history...: CWSA, Vol 1, p394-395

²² CWSA, Vol 1, p394-395

²³ CSWA, Vol 1, The National Value of Art, p453

²⁴ CSWA, Vol 1, The National Value of Art, p439

²⁵ CWSA, Vol 29, Letters on Yoga II, p293

²⁶ CWM Vol 12, On Education, p368

²⁷ CWM Vol3, Power of Imagination, p156

²⁸ CWM Vol 10, p 162

8. In an intriguing anecdote from 3 June 1967, Mother was given the story of a girl who “had no imagination” and was taught to “try and make contact precisely with that intuitive zone, by keeping quiet, falling silent and listening. And it seems that after some time, she had extraordinary results in that way, by falling silent and listening – answers which were really remarkable...”. This appears to have occurred in Auroville. Mother commented, “That’s what they are now trying to do here in their new classes: teaching them to make contact with the intuitive zone. It’s certainly quite superior.”²⁹ This focus on teaching children silence was something that Pavitra, the former Director of the Ashram School appointed by Mother also encouraged, undoubtedly with her approval.³⁰
9. Imagination is susceptible to influences, both positive and negative. Therefore, it is important to select carefully what materials are used in a classroom. Mother was asked if fiction (“imaginary stories”) had value. She said it depended on “the quality of the imagination.”³¹
10. Given the vulnerability of imagination to outside influences, it is inevitable that Mother would say that what is sought is ultimately a “communion with the supreme,”³² to become a channel for imagination and inspiration of the very highest kind. To someone who was ready to hear it, she wrote, “let your imagination be moulded by your faith in Sri Aurobindo...”.³³

²⁹ Auroville in Mother’s Words, Vol 1 of 2, p199-p200, 3 June 1967

³⁰ “The child will be shown by experience that is in him, above the movement of the ordinary nature... a region of deep peace and silence...”: Education and The Aim of Human Life, p 152

³¹ CWM Vol 4, p154

³² CWM Vol 2, Words of Long Ago, p123-p124

³³ CWM Vol 3, Power of Imagination, p157