

Text of the Convocation address to be delivered on 4th August 2014 at Sri Ramakrishna Mission Sikshanamandira, Howrah.

Respected Chairman, Honorable Justice Pinaki Chandra Ghosh, Chief Guest Professor Suranjan Das, Vice Chancellor, University of Calcutta, Principal Rev. Swami Tattwasarananda, Secretary Rev Swami Divyananda, distinguished guests in the audience, parents of many wards who have graduated today and very dear students. It is a very important day in your life as well as the life of this college which has completed 56 years of its existence. The college has grown from being a Teacher Training College to a Postgraduate Institute offering education at the highest level. This speaks volumes of the people who have devoted their time and energy in making their dream a reality.

In your life you have reached a definite stage, a stage where you need to stop and take some crucial decisions. It is an important stage for there are many paths that lead you from here. One path takes you to the portals of employment, you are equipped for that – perhaps that is the easiest path you can choose; the second path leads you to higher studies – this demands that you prove your worth for you need to pass through a rigorous process of selection; and there is yet another path which can take you into a totally different world – and I sincerely hope nobody chooses this, and I will give you my reasons for saying this very soon.

Though the first path is the easiest, it has in it some inherent nobility. It is not every day that you come across a good teacher. I want all of you to become not just good teachers, but exemplary teachers. What makes a successful teacher? What is his/her job? Can one be trained or taught to become a good teacher or does one develop oneself? These are some of the questions that you should be preoccupied with at this moment. Let us look at these questions from a broader perspective.

Today we are all busy talking about professional development, and this concept has made inroads into teaching profession. We should be glad at this, for till recently teaching was not considered as a profession. A lawyer, a doctor an engineer, a carpenter, an electrician, a plumber was considered professional, but not a teacher. Why was this so? This was because the modern society did not repose much faith in the teacher. The attitude of the teachers or gurus was different in ancient India. However, the societal structure has undergone a lot

of change since. In modern world visibility and tangibility are emphasized. The job that a teacher does is not tangible for everyone to see. It does not carry a warranty with it. We teachers are responsible for giving the society such an impression, and we should strive hard to change this attitude of the society. Efforts are being made in this direction and teacher education programmes are making the student teachers aware of their duties and responsibilities. I am not going to reiterate all that you have learnt in the course of these years in college, but will quickly help you to recapitulate some salient points which might help you to see yourself as a professional.

1. A professional has to be well prepared for his job. A carpenter, a plumber or an electrician is well prepared with the necessary tools and is confident of the job he has to do. He can be approached again if something goes wrong with the work he has done. In a similar way, let us do our job with devotion. We will make a promise today that we will never enter a class until we are thoroughly prepared for teaching the lesson we are expected to. Let us be sure and confident that we are familiar with all parts of the lesson we need to teach and help learners get over the problems of learning the lesson. Let us be ready to face questions asked by the learners any number of times and provide a proper response without feeling tired or losing our patience.
2. A professional has to be punctual and make sure that he/she completes the work assigned. The other professionals I have mentioned earlier are a proof of this statement. A doctor certainly cures you of your disease when you approach him and follow his instructions. An engineer builds a house which makes it comfortable for you to stay in. Similarly a teacher should ensure that the lesson taught is useful and serves the purpose it is meant for. As a teacher of a language, I should ensure that my learner can use the language for all purposes of communication.
3. Professionalism means not getting distracted while engaged in the work on hand. This when translated in terms of work means the following. Do I prepare myself well before I enter the classroom? Do I as a teacher go to class on time? Do I stay in my class for the requisite amount of time? Do I simply stay put in the class, or do I make myself useful to my learners in the class? Do I reflect on my teaching and try to improve my performance? If the answer to all these questions is in the affirmative, we

are professionals. Let us desist from wasting our time in class. Let us take an oath not to carry our mobile phones into the class.

4. A professional knows his tools and can use them efficiently. His sole aim is to satisfy the clientele. As teachers what are the tools we use? A textbook is often defined as a tool in the hands of a teacher. This is an important tool. We should know how it is made. We should understand its weaknesses and improvise the tool to increase its efficiency. Do we follow a lesson in the textbook blindly, or do we help our learners relate themselves with what is being taught? Application of knowledge is an essential feature of today's education, and if we successfully wean our learners away from mere rote learning we find a place for ourselves as professionals. Further, when we give a test or an assignment to our learners, are we objective. Can we justify ourselves for the marks awarded to each learner with a certain degree of objectivity? Do we give constructive feedback well in time to the learners to enable them to grow?

We have looked at some qualities that we should develop in order to become professionals as teachers. In India, we have given education, nay learning a prime place in life. Education is not learning, it is not knowledge, it is the way we live and Indian poets and saints have sung songs in praise of such learning. These sayings from great saints carry traces of professionalism that we had conceived of in the long past. I will quote a few of these in support of my statement.

'Vidya' is loosely translated as 'education' in English. Is this an apt translation? I am not sure if it captures the concept in a comprehensive manner. Look at this quartet which eulogizes vidya:

विद्या नम नरस्य रूपामधिकम प्रहृन्न गुप्तं धनं
विद्या भोगकरी यशः सुखकारी विद्या गुरुणाम गुरुः ।
विद्या बन्धुजनो विदेशगमने विद्य परं दैवतं
विद्या रजसु पूज्यते नहि धनं विद्या विहीनः पशुः ॥

Vidya enhances the beauty of a person, and it is indeed a hidden treasure. It helps you enjoy pleasures of a different kind, and it is truly the teacher's teacher. It is our vidya that is worshipped by friends, relatives and even strangers who we meet on our visits abroad; it is indeed our guardian angel. Kings respect a man with vidya and not one with money, without this vidya, a human being is a mere animal, a brute.

The meaning of this sloka is deeper than the meaning I have offered. I will dwell on just one or two points here before going on to the other slokas. I like to focus on 'रूपामधिकम्' and 'गुरुणाम गुरुः'

रूपामधिकम् - this phrase does not necessarily mean beauty or handsomeness which are external features. A person with vidya outshines others in company. His speech is worth listening to, his thoughts are valid and he carries himself confidently wherever he is. This enhances his handsomeness. As Oliver Goldsmith put it, 'handsome is that handsome does.' It polishes one's personality.

गुरुणाम गुरुः - This phrase can be translated as 'a teacher of teacher'. The inner truth is slightly different. A teacher also needs to learn. A teacher ceases to be a teacher once he stops learning. Vidya or knowledge is never attained in full, it is an ongoing perpetual pursuit, and keeps the teacher active with learning. Vidya does not teach us, it helps us to learn. In other words a teacher, is a lifelong learner.

Look around yourself and you will find people who fit this meaning. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsji was a living example of this sloka. Going by formal education he hardly had any education, but there are few in this world who do not respect him or have not learnt from him. He is an epitome of knowledge

Not all of us possess vidya. Many people in this world do survive with wealth and are happy. Is there a special reason to possess this vidya? Take a look at this small couplet:

न चोर हार्यं न च राज हार्यं न भ्रातृ भाज्यं न च भारकारि
व्ययं कृते वर्धत एव नित्यं विद्याधनं सर्वधनप्रधानम्

If you possess vidya, it cannot be stolen away by a thief, nor a king can seize it with force. It is not like material property that dwindles on being shared with brothers, nor is it very heavy to carry. Unlike money, it has a special quality. It grows in size as you keep spending it every day. The more you spend, the more it becomes. So it is the most precious wealth anyone can possess in this world.

I do not like to explicate this couplet. It is self explanatory; however, I would like to give you one more shloka that is complementary in meaning and much easier to understand. Here it is:

विद्वत्त्वं च ब्रूयत्त्वं च नैव तुल्यम् कदाचन ।
स्वदेशे पञ्ज्यते राजा विद्वान् सर्वत्र पञ्ज्यते ॥

Can there be a comparison between a king and a scholar? No not possible. This is because, a king is worshipped by his subjects in his own country, but a scholar is worshipped by everyone all over the world. He attains universal recognition

In order to seek vidya, we need a guru. This guru should have all the qualities of a professional that I have enumerated a little while ago. Such a guru helps us learn and achieve our goal. Look at the benefits a guru can bestow on us

ध्यानमूलं गुरुमूर्तिः पूजामूलं गुरुरपदम् ।
मन्त्रमूलं गुरुवाक्यं मोक्षमूलं गुरुकृपा ॥

Guru has a form that helps us meditate, and his feet are the best objects of our worship. Every word that he pronounces has the power of mantra, and without his mercy, we cannot attain liberation. Kabir when asked who he would bow down to if God and Guru both happened to appear before him, his unhesitating response was that he would touch the feet of the Guru first. It is Guru who shows us the path to God hence he deserves the first place.

Having graduated from this college today, you will occupy the position of a guru in the lives of hundreds, no thousands of children – young learners. Ask yourself, ‘am I worthy of being called a guru?’ When you can confidently answer this question with ‘yes’, the education you have received here has become vidya and you deserve to be congratulated. My hearty felicitations to you!

I will conclude my talk with a sloka from Sri Shankaracharya who was a great teacher himself. His concept of Guru was encased in Dakshinamurty, and these are the words with which he describes Dakshinamurthy:

*Chitram vata tarormule vridddhaa shishyaa gurur-yuvaa
Gurostu maunam vyaakyaanam shishyaastu chinna samsayaah*

Imagine a scene as follows: Under a well spread tree are seated a group of students (disciples) who are all aged, and the teacher teaching them is young. The language of teacher's discourse is silence, and listening to this all the doubts the pupils have are annihilated.

Can you ever imagine a scene like this? Is it possible? Yes it is. The teacher is young not because of the age, but young because he has never given up learning. He is forever in search of new knowledge, and is forever pursuing his research. It is this thought process that has kept the teacher young. The disciples on the other hand are worried about the material surroundings and do not pay much attention to what needs to be learnt, to what is happening in the world around us. It is this lack of interest that makes them age faster than they should.

The Guru speaks through silence. This is significant. When we speak each word we utter should have proper meaning, structure and link. Each word should be weighed before it is uttered. Hence the delivery of speech may be slow, but qualitatively very valid. It is such speech that is interspersed with silence, allowing the disciples to chew every word, understand it clearly, discuss it makes the discourse powerful – so powerful that it can destroy all the doubts that students have.

Speech is very important in our lives. We should speak well for it is the best ornament we can wear. Just listen to this shloka that tells you how important speech is to a man, especially a teacher:

*keyūrāṇi na bhūṣayanti puruṣaṁ hārā na candrojjvalāḥ
na snānaṁ na vilepanaṁ na kusumaṁ nālaṅkṛtā mūrdhajāḥ |
vāṇyēkā samalaṅkaroti puruṣaṁ yā saṁskṛtā dhāryate
kṣīyante khalu bhūṣaṇāni satataṁ vāgbhūṣaṇaṁ bhūṣaṇaṁ | |*

A man who wants to decorate himself will find a bracelet inadequate, all the necklaces and shining jewels like the full moon, nor will taking bath in fragrant

waters or decorating the hair with flowers make him attractive. It is his speech that gives him grace, a speech that is cultivated with good upbringing. All ornaments are transient, they wear out, but speech which is the real ornament remains with man forever.

On this sacred day, when we have taken an oath and obtained a degree, let us take another oath – an oath that promises us to be good teachers, exemplary teachers who can show the right path to our future generation and not follow any other path. Let us outshine others with our refined speech in our endeavour to become good teachers. Let us on this occasion remember Swami Vivekananda who said ‘Education is the manifestation of perfection’ Let us try to achieve it.

Thank you all for listening to me patiently.

गुरुर्ब्रह्मा गुरुर्विष्णुर्गुरुर्देवो महेश्वरः ।
गुरुरेव परं ब्रह्म तस्मै श्रीगुरवे नमः ॥

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