



Helping The Students To Fully Blossom: Amma Holds Discussions With U.S. Professors

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When the professors from the United States took their seats, the first thing Amma asked them was if they were tired. Indeed, they had been on a whirlwind schedule: first to Delhi where they signed the MoU regarding the Indo-US e-Learning initiative ([news](#)), then to the Coimbatore campus of Amrita University where they participated in the initiative's launch with the President of India ([news](#)) and then to Amritapuri for an audience with Amma. After a few hours, most of them would again be on a plane ride back to their respective U.S. cities.

Eleven professors out of the 20 who are participating in the e-Learning initiative made the trip to Amritapuri. They were from the Georgia Institute of Technology, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Maryland, the University of Michigan, the University of the California at San Diego, the University of North Dakota, the University of Washington, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Purdue University.

Once everyone was settled, it was Amma who began asking the questions. "What are your expectations for this project?" Amma asked. "In what way should students start developing? What are the areas in which you think we are lacking?" Amma told the professors that, as they were now familiar with higher education in both the U.S. and in India, they were in a unique position to help India fine-tune its institutions.

"All of us have the capacity to contribute to society," Amma then told the professors. "All of you have tremendous intellectual capacities. In India there are a lot of people with talent, but because they don't receive the proper opportunities, these talents are never able to really blossom. If they were to have access to the right opportunities, surely their talents would blossom and they would really benefit the world. This is the case not only in India, but also in villages in places like Africa and Bangladesh. Amma doesn't want to change the villages into cities, but if these people get the necessary help, they can become more

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creative, and that creativity can be used to help the world."

Dr. Anderson Smith, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies & Academic Affairs at Georgia Institute of Technology, commented that he was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm he saw in the students during his visit. "If I could just take some of the enthusiasm for learning that I saw in the students who were asking the president questions and bottle that up and bring it back to my students in the United States, I think we would see that a lot of them would want to come to India also."

Amma agreed and added, "However, there is not much freedom here. Students are like pictures restricted to their frames. So they are not able to express their talents. Especially in the field of research, if we can give them the right working environment, they can accomplish so much. But India has been lagging in that."

Amma then cited the example of an Indian Noble Prize winner who said that in India, his talents were only appreciated after he went to the West and won the prize. Before then, he had been unable to attract any funding or recognition. Amma said, "I am not blaming the government, but the system has to change so that the children can express their talents and creativity."

Dr. Santosh Kumar Seelan, an Indian-born professor teaching at the Department of Space Studies at the University of North Dakota, agreed with Amma. "I think Einstein said it best. He said, 'I think it is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education.' The one statistic which is very glaring is that for the last 105 years, approximately 315 Noble Prizes have been handed out, but India's share is only maybe a handful. This points to the fact that we are educating within the framework very well but we are not properly kindling curiosity and creativity in our youth. In this obsession to offer good formal education, we seem to be paying a price that may be too high."

"It's not only in the field of science," Amma responded. "It is in sports and the arts as well. People feel a lot of suppression here. They feel they are not able to do all that they really can."

To further illustrate, Amma told the professors about Dr. L. Ganeshan, who is currently serving at the Cancer Institute at AIMS, the Ashram's charitable hospital in Cochin. Amma said that Dr. Ganeshan had always wanted to do research in India, but because he found that the proper research opportunities were unavailable to him here, he ended up working at Oxford. When he later discovered that AIMS provided such opportunities, he left his position at Oxford and immediately returned to his motherland.

Dr. Greg Weisenstein, the Vice President and Provost of the University of North Dakota, sought Amma's wisdom regarding ways to establish and maintain ethics in society. "We have tremendous concern with respect to the development of a society where people care about people and the environment in which they live," he said. "What's the role of our leaders, our educational system and our families in developing ethics with children and across our society? How can we do a better job of developing a highly ethical society?"

Amma told him that before any leaders could hope to awaken ethics in society, they would first have to awaken these ethics in themselves. "It is easy to wake up someone who is sleeping, but impossible to wake up someone who is pretending to be asleep," Amma said. "Only when they awaken themselves can they awaken others. Love and peace are the real foundation. Educators have to focus on how to develop these qualities in our children. If we really reflect on the situation today, we will see that in a family of three, each lives like an isolated island. There is no heart-to-heart communication. Thus we lose the awareness that we are really links on the same chain. Our actions have an affect on others. Families and educators have a very important role to play in developing this awareness."

Amma said that we have to start educating our children in values from a very young age. This can be done by introducing books into our syllabi that teach them the importance of values. "Put it in a way that will interest them," Amma said, suggesting the use of stories about people who have lived such values in their lives.

"Our education standards have reached the sky, but our values have descended to hell (Patala)," Amma said. "It is like the condition of an airplane that has gone beyond the earth's gravitational pull and has become lost in space. Similarly, we have lost touch with our values and have therefore lost touch with ourselves. These values have to be taught in school itself. In every subject possible, a little emphasis should be given to the education of the heart--not religious studies, but spiritual values."

Georgia Tech's Dr. Smith then brought up the issue of religion trying to impose restrictions on science. "My own opinion is that science in the United States is under the greatest attack that it's ever faced, and it comes from religion," he said. "This debate has nothing to do with values or ethics in the science classroom, but with respect to a particular brand of religious dogma that some want to have placed in the classroom, and I would just like to hear your comments on this."

Amma said that the people attacking science were blindly following their religions. "They are not applying their religion in a practical way. Don't teach religion in the classroom. Teach the essence of religion--spirituality. Religion is like the finger pointing at the fruit, saying that if you eat that fruit you will become immortal. But instead of going for the fruit, we are holding onto the finger and we miss spirituality, which is the essence. Spirituality means values. If we teach spirituality there won't be a problem."

In defence of certain types of scientific research that some religious institutions are trying to prohibit, Amma gave the example of how when someone undergoes chemo- or radiotherapy, many good cells die along with the cancerous ones. Amma also said that there are diseases today that are killing more people than wars. Therefore certain kinds of experiments are beneficial and should be allowed to continue because they benefit humanity by saving many lives. "Amma feels the people attacking science are not really understanding the import of the scriptures."

Soon, it was time for the professors to depart for their flights back to the United States. But before they left, they each came for Amma's darshan. A few even asked her to sign books of her teachings which they had received.

The overall feeling was one of great enthusiasm for the e-Learning collaboration. The U.S. professors will begin lecturing from Amrita University in early 2006; their classes will be transmitted via ISRO's EduSat satellite, creating virtual classrooms in hundreds of universities across India.

After the meeting, Dr. Rosalyn Pertzborn, the Director of the Office of Space Science Education at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, said that Amma had confirmed many of her feelings regarding education. "This gathering has been a confirmation of values which I have strongly felt, but had not been comfortable expressing back home," she said. "Now, after coming here, I feel I have the confidence to express these opinions, and I am looking forward to coming back to India to teach under this project."

--KaliCharan

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