

Developing a core value system

In a *gurukulam*, after class hours, students and teachers co-exist

A casual perusal of any history book that deals with the origin of Vedic literature will tell you that life in the Vedic period was segregated into four stages or *ashramas* (*brahmacharya*, *grihasta*, *vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*), allowing people to adhere to a basic code of conduct and behaviour. Each stage had the goal of fulfillment and self-development. Admittedly, much has changed between then and now, but, of particular importance here is the *brahmacharya* (student life) and the concept of *gurukulam*.

Gurukulam is the practice where the student lives in the house of the *guru* for the duration of his education. The *guru* teaches him the various disciplines, while the student also uses the experience of living along with the *guru* and other students to prepare himself for employment. In the medieval period this was the only way that students were taught – there were no written records and oral transmission was the only way to spread the knowledge. Over time, the *gurukulam* system has been replaced by others that are more relevant to the education system of the day. However, the basic advantage, benefit and goodness of the *gurukulam* is applicable even to this day.

The *gurukulam* is an ecosystem in itself – there are dependencies, balances, objectives and a consequence of particular importance is the ambience that should foster and promote learning. When we first made plans for Great Lakes, we were keen to create such a system – not merely an in-campus ‘hostel’ for the students, but an environment where students and teachers are able to interact beyond the confines of the classroom and take the learning experience to an entirely new level. We succeeded and I have personally witnessed the impact of a *gurukulam* that functions as intended.

Would it surprise you therefore to learn that much of the learning actually takes place outside the classroom? The reason is that a teacher has to constrain himself to teaching a specific topic in the classroom, whereas outside the classroom, the dynamic changes. The world is your oyster and the teacher and student can engage in discussions on any subject matter. I have repeatedly found that the textbook dullard inside the class undergoes a metamorphosis and emerges a thought leader in a completely different sphere of knowledge outside the classroom. There is an explosion of ideas, energetic discussions on everything from the modest pen to the spectacular Chandrayaan, creation and destruction of business



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models and product life cycles – all in a span of a couple of hours; each of these interactions leads to the creation of an extraordinary learning experience.

The other intangible albeit profound impact is on the emotional or behavioural aspect of the student and teacher. Living as a ‘community’ (*kul/tribe*) allows people to get in touch with their sensitivities, builds trouble-shooting and problem-solving capabilities, creates a familial bond, inculcates higher values like self-discipline, restraint, sacrifice, greater-common-good, moral boundaries etc. This has an impact not only on the all members of the *gurukulam* but it effervesces and touches the lives of all those who come in contact with the *gurukulam*. An interesting yet welcome outcome of the *gurukulam* system today is that access to information and knowledge has made it possible for students to be smarter than their *gurus*. On many occasions I have deemed it a personal privilege to have been introduced to a new concept or technique that I wasn’t aware of by my students. The flow of learning has therefore become two-way and it is only in the after-class hours that teachers and students can break the shackles of their student-teacher roles and explore the boundaries of knowledge, learning and experience.

To behold the actual *gurukulam* system at work is beautiful. Some of the fondest memories with my students at Great Lakes Chennai campus include my early morning walks at 5 am breathing in the pristine and unpolluted air, while engaging in a heated debate about the onslaught of the fourth industrial revolution; the late night snack and chat session on the steps of our in-house Ganesh temple about strengthening key internal processes; celebrating festivals and milestones away from loved ones, yet in the company of another family; hurting and grieving at the loss of one of our own; incubating not one but many ideas that have all been born outside the classroom but are thriving businesses and have come into their own today.

You see, a *gurukulam*, today, is not a place where a *guru* teaches a student. It is a place where the student and teacher together take ownership, are responsible for themselves and others, learn to work and live together in peace and harmony, understand the impact of their contributions and above all develop a core value system that makes them responsible citizens and leaders. It is, in so many ways, a way of life.

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