

An Important but Sometimes Forgotten Principle of Sanskrit Teaching

Iain McGilchrist's magisterial book '*The Master and his Emissary*' shows how the human brain has two hemispheres, each of these with a distinctive but complimentary role in our understanding of the world.

The right hemisphere, called by McGilchrist the Master, is characterised by wholeness, breadth and an openness to mystery beyond logical thinking. It governs such areas as poetry, narrative and meaning.

The left hemisphere, which he calls the emissary, has a more subordinate role. It tends to detail, is narrower in scope and governs logical processes such as grammar, analysis and everyday communication.

The relationship between these two hemispheres is something like that between Buddhi and Manas. It is also mirrored in the Sanskrit language itself. The right hemisphere by its rich and profound literature and the left by its orderly linguistic structure.

In teaching Sanskrit the right hemisphere, the realm of wholeness and meaning, has to come first. Therefore I begin my lessons by introducing an example of the finest and most profound Sanskrit literature, usually a verse from the Bhagavad Gita, part of our IGCSE set text. We look carefully at all aspects of the verse – metre, dhatus, compounds, case endings and so forth - but always in reference to the overall message of the verse as a whole.

Admittedly, much of this is beyond the current expertise of the group, but I am confident that, if attention is properly paid, something will go in at a deeper level and be available for recollection at a later date. This exposure to the finest literature also provides a good introduction to subjects like sandhi which will be considered systematically at a later date.

The remainder and larger part of the lesson is concerned with such things as analytical grammar and translation. Even here it is often possible to refer back to aspects of the verse we started the lesson by considering. In this way we remain connected with the heart of the language, indeed, the very best of the language. Consequently the lesson is blessed with a spiritual cast. This being so, I would like to think we are getting our priorities right.

A merry Christmas to you all.