

## Review

# Educational philosophy of Swami Vivekananda

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Oxford Dictionary defines education as the process of receiving or giving systemic information, especially at a school, college or university. Dictionary.com defines education as the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, and generally of preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life. Swami Vivekananda was an Indian Monk, who toured almost the whole world but whose philosophy was deeply rooted in ancient Indian wisdom where education is acquired from spiritual life. For him, education was enlightenment. Teacher was the person who dispels darkness of evils. "Acharya (Headmaster) was a person who provides exemplary leadership by conducting himself. Education system was to take care of complete health, that is, physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being with a core of ethics and morality. He devised the idea that true education aims at life-building, man-making and character-developing. His Spiritual Humanism Philosophy of Education showed that education can be used as a tool to achieve 'social justice' and for resolution of all ethnic, religious, racial or social conflicts by propagating the idea of "Common Origin of Soul" and "Oneness of Soul."

**Key words:** Conflict resolution, education, philosophy, religion, social justice, spiritual education, spiritual humanism, Swami Vivekananda.

## INTRODUCTION

*"Plants are shaped by cultivation and men by education..... We are born weak, we need strength, we are born totally unprovided. We need judgment. Everything we do not have at birth, and which we need when we grow up, is given us by education."* Rousseau (1712-1778).

### Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda (12/01/1863 - 04/07/1902) was a social reformer with an India-centric global vision. His views of education are rooted in traditional Indian philosophy that nurtures the ideals of harmony, compassion, tolerance and peace; and where man-making and character-building are the basic objectives. Recognizing his contribution, UNESCO in 1973 has declared him as one of the eminent educationists of the world. Comprehending Vivekananda's vision of education requires elaboration of some of his definitions of educational terms.

### Education

Education is enlightenment. Education is illumination. Education is awakening. In "Gayatri Mantra" we pray "Dhiyo Yo Nah Prachodaya" – 'Endow us with (the lights of) understanding.' Swami Vivekananda epitomized this Vedanta philosophy in modern times. 'Vedanta' which is derived from the Sanskrit words 'Veda' (wisdom) and 'anta' (supreme), signifies 'supreme wisdom.' Traditional Vedanta philosophy defines education as "The manifestation of perfection already in man." Every soul is the source of indefinite knowledge. Every human being is a reservoir of immense potential. He is born with an endless range of abilities and talents, known and unknown to him. These potentials, which are dormant, need the awakening touch of the education for their

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actualization. What a man learns is actually what he 'discovers within him' by taking away the lid off his own soul.

The main focus of the teaching-learning process is to make the entire hidden potential manifest, rather manifest to the highest possible level. Thus it is critical in shaping the future of humanity.

Vivekananda said "Education must provide life building, man-making, character-building assimilation of ideas." This ideal education will produce an awakened person - the ideal one who knows how to improve his intellect, purify his emotion, and stand like rock on moral virtues and unselfishness. "If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character," he said, "you have more education than the man who has memorized the whole library."

### **Aims of education**

Education is a process of self-development. It is the cultivation of people who, at the end, are 1) able to perceive accurately, 2) think clearly 3) act effectively on self selected aspirations and 4) are consistently against in practice of cognitive cartography. Mark Twain (1835 - 1910) once remarked, "Only education can transform a cabbage into a cauliflower." But long before him, this great social reformer and advocate of social justice, Swami Vivekananda, cried, "The education which does not help the common masses of people to equip themselves for the struggle of life, which does not bring about the strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy and the courage of a lion - is it worth the name of education? Real education is that which enables one to stand on one's own strong legs." According to him, the aims of education are:

- Education is for character-building, bringing out the faculties of a man.
- Education is for developing spiritual life.
- Education is for social justice; development of compassion, humanity, tolerance and universal brotherhood.
- Education is for developing the spirit of the renunciation; giving up of worldly pursuits as well as a life of pride, arrogance and ease. In place of these, we should be able to learn how to acquire knowledge, humanity, self-sacrifice and a desire to work for others.
- Education is for attaining self sufficiency, promotion of self reliance and confidence.
- Education is for social development.
- Women education.

### **Character-building education**

Today's education is centered around career-building whereas Vivekananda education scheme is centered around character-building.

Every person is what his thoughts are. All thoughts, conscious or unconscious, if repeatedly strike the mind, ultimately mould it to form habits. Character is nothing but repeated habits. Thus, only by acquisition, assimilation and repetition of desirable habits; one's character is formed. It is here the teachers play the most crucial role of an icon, by providing exemplary leadership. The impact of the live-teaching is more didactic teaching. Swami Vivekananda said "words, even thoughts contribute only one-third influence. It is the man who makes the rest two-third."

A wholesome curriculum which imparts culturally-approved value to the young minds is also critical in character-building. It is not sufficient to teach what is good or bad, but it is also needed to explain why they are so and how to discriminate between them. The classroom should be the arena for teaching of value and ethics.

### **Spiritual education and religion**

In Vedanta philosophy, human beings are covered with five-sheaths - the physical, vital, mental, intellectual and the spiritual, with the last one forming the core of character.

Every soul, according to *Swamiji*, is potentially divine and everyone's goal is to manifest the divine within. Spirituality is the manifestation of this divinity already in man. *Shri Ramakrishna*, the *guru* of *Swamiji*, used to say that the Bengali synonym of man is *manush*; that is, man + hush, which symbolizes a mind with spiritual consciousness. This self-actualization is possible only through spiritual education.

Education should involve all domains of health: physical, mental, social and spiritual with an ethical culture. But spirituality, which is the eternal principle that inspires every religion, must form the innermost core of education system. "What is the use of polishing the outside when there is no inside," he said. The ultimate aim of all training is to make a man. In today's world, this spiritual consciousness translates itself as values of unselfishness ethics, compassion, tolerance, security and harmony to develop peace and democracy. As Mother Teresa (1910-1997) later explained, "we should help a Hindu become a better Hindu, a Muslim to become a better Muslim, a Catholic to become a better Catholic." Thus, in order to improve the density of humankind, to eradicate socio-cultural dogmas, and to promote humanity, education must take its roots back into the science of spirituality.

To counterbalance the unequal socio-economic growth in India, he prescribed "Before flooding the land with socialistic or political ideas, first deluge the land with spiritual ideas. If you attempt to get secular knowledge without religion, I tell you plainly, vain is your attempt. In India, it will never have a hold on in the people." However, it is important to remember that for him, being religious meant 'leading life in such a way that we

manifest our higher nature, truth and goodness in our thoughts, word and deeds.'

### ***Education and social justice***

During his travel all over India, Swami Vivekananda was deeply moved to see the appalling poverty and backwardness of masses. He was the first modern religious *guru* to understand and openly declare that real cause of India's downfall was neglect of the masses. He realized that the immediate need was to provide food and other necessities to the hungry millions. For this they ought to be taught improved methods of agriculture, village industries, etc.

Vivekananda grasped the crux of the problem of poverty in India. This had escaped the attention of most social reformers. He realized that owing to centuries of oppression, the downtrodden masses had lost faith in their capacity to improve their lives. It was necessary to infuse into their minds faith in them. For this, they needed a life-giving, inspiring message. Swamiji found this message in the "Principle of 'Atman,' the doctrine of the potential divinity of the soul, taught in Vedanta." He saw that, in spite of poverty, the masses clung to religion. But they had never been taught the life-giving principles of Vedanta and how to apply them in practical life. Thus the masses needed two kinds of knowledge: (a) secular knowledge to improve their economic condition and (b) spiritual knowledge to infuse in them faith in themselves and strengthen their morality. The next question was how to spread these two kinds of knowledge among the masses?

"Through Universal Education" – this was the answer that Swamiji found ultimately.

In Swamiji's words, "Travelling through many cities of Europe and observing in them the comforts that even the poor people had, I used to shed tears. What made the difference? 'Education' was the answer I got." He stated emphatically that if the Indian society is to be reformed, education has to reach everyone - high and low. He said that the sense of dignity rises in a man when he becomes conscious of his inner spirit. And it is the very purpose of education.

Often societies tailored education to meet the needs of the high-ups only, thus robbing the weak their freedom to determine their own destiny. In recent years, the state is expected to make education reach every nook and corner of the society. However, education is still inaccessible for the underprivileged. Vivekananda felt that this type of alienation would one day weaken our country. He argued that any nation had advanced only to the extent to which education and culture reached its masses. "Unless there is uniform circulation of national blood all over the body, the nation can not rise."

When India was under British shackles, Vivekananda prescribed the remedy for the downtrodden, "They should not only be given education to make them self-reliant, but

also ideas, moral training and understanding of their great history so that can be motivated to work for their own salvation. Furthermore, they must be given back their culture, without which there is no hope for sustainable progress."

Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) once exclaimed that education is the only weapon by which you can change the world. But long before, this great votary of social equality quoted Mahrishi Patanjli (250BC) to explain the role of 'education,' "*Tatah khetrikavat.*" After the farmer breaks the barrier to the course of flood-water, it flows on its own force. Similarly, education unveils person's innate power who then removes all unfairness and other social maladies. In Vivekananda's view, an ideal society should provide educational resources and opportunities to each of its members, especially, to those who are in utmost need of education. And also to those who are not resourceful enough to avail the present facilities.

### ***Education and culture***

Every society has its outer sheath called knowledge and an inner core called culture. All students are exposed to both of these, knowingly or unknowingly, to be molded and educated accordingly. Tagore (1861-1941) said "Education is a diamond and culture its glory." Swamiji observed "It is culture that absorbs shock, knowledge is only skin-deep. A little scratch brings about the old savage." Thus, the importance of exposing to and teaching of human culture cannot be overemphasized in making education human-friendly. According to him, the cultural values of the country should form an integral part of the curriculum of education. The culture of India has its roots in her spiritual values. The time-tested values are to be imprinted in the minds of the students through the study of the epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Gita, Veda and Upanishads. This practice would keep the perennial flow of Indian spiritual values alive.

## **EDUCATION SYSTEM**

The ideal education-system should not only impart theoretical knowledge but also enable the learner to apply intelligently all the noble ideas and to grow physically, intellectually, morally and spiritually.

Today's system of education drives a mass of information into the mind of the student, that is, 'the receiving machine.' But, by the true definition of 'education', the student is a living reservoir with an innate potential to do great deeds. And only true 'education' can bring this out. Like the body needs good food for health, the mind needs civilized educational and cultural ideas for growth. The soul needs meditation for purification and prayer for wisdom. Proper education, apart from loads of information, is supposed to impart such intellectual knowledge and spiritual wisdom. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) explained later, "The function of

education is to teach one to think intensively and act critically. Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education."

To develop a balanced Indian National Education System (INES), Vivekananda advocated a harmonious blend of the dynamism and scientific attitude of the west with the spiritual culture of our country. Education system, according to him, must inculcate:

- a) Development of health.
- b) Assimilation of information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom.
- c) Sense of duty and service.
- d) Control over senses, impulses and instincts.
- e) Proper direction of emotions.
- f) Promotion of concentration and willpower.

Swami Vivekananda wanted "To set in motion a system that will bring the noblest ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest." With this aim of propagating Practical Vedanta, he established the 'Ramakrishan Mission' in 1897. Although Swamiji was of the opinion that mother tongue is the right medium for mass education, he prescribed the learning of English and Sanskrit also.

In Swamiji scheme, "Education is a life-long process" and the curriculum must include:

- Culture history, language, vedanta studies, and aesthetics: Education, according to Swamiji, remains incomplete without the teaching of aesthetics or fine arts. He cites Japan as an example of how the combination of art and utility can make a nation great.
- Women's studies: He observed that although men and women are equally competent in academic matters, yet women have a special aptitude and competence for studies relating to home and family to make women strong, fearless, and conscious of their chastity and dignity. He recommended the introduction of subjects like sewing, nursing, home science, culinary art, etc., that were not part of curriculum at his time.
- Scientific knowledge.
- Technical and vocational studies.
- Meditation and yoga for concentration of mind.
- Games, sports and physical education: Swamiji laid great stress on physical health because a sound mind resides in a sound body. He often quoted the Upanishadic dictum 'nayamatma balahinena labhyah'; that is, the self cannot be realized by the physically weak.

### Student

In order to formulate such man-making education system, it is imperative to realize the true nature of students. Are they merely an 'organized mass of cells'? Is the 'mind' only a by-product of highly organized brain cells?

In Indian philosophy, every being is a 'soul'. The

student is a self-conscious soul, encased in a physical body, having an inner-organ 'mind,' which controls the faculties of intellect, willpower and emotions. These faculties can be trained into the highest efficacy. Afterwards, the mind-body combination, with education, develops into a 'human character.'

In order to become a 'good receiver' of education, the student must be 'teachable.' The essential virtues of the taught are: purity, real thirst of knowledge and perseverance. He must have confidence, conviction, trust, reverence, humanity and submission towards his teachers. This teacher-pupil relationship, based on mutual respect and trust, is the foundation of education system proposed by Vivekananda.

For him, educating the mind is the student's highest priority. Merely stuffing the brain with information, technicalities and trivia will only congest his mind unless it is nourished and strengthened. Learning to concentrate should be the focus of the student. He should learn to detach his mind from outwardly distractions and then focus on the desired object.

Swamiji said, "To me the very essence of education is concentrating the mind and not collecting the data." Concentration, which necessarily implies detachment from other things, constitutes a part of Brahmacharya that is one of the foundations of his system of education. Brahmacharya stands for the practice of self-control. It, along with meditation, fortified by moral purity and passion for truth, helps the student to think beyond his perishable body and senses. The student thus realizes his immortal divine self, which is the source of infinite existence, infinite knowledge and infinite bliss. At this stage, he becomes aware that his self is identical with all other selves of the universe. Hence education, in Vivekananda's view, enables one to comprehend one's own self as the self everywhere. The essential unity of the entire universe is realized through education.

Centuries ago, Seneca the Younger (4BC – 64AD), Roman stoic philosopher and statesman, identified the true aim of education as, "Now we are not merely to stick knowledge on to the soul, we must incorporate it into her. The soul should not be sprinkled with knowledge but steeped in it." We find a striking resemblance of his thoughts in Swamiji.

### Teacher

As formal education is becoming more institutionalized, teachers are playing more significant roles in shaping the destiny of the nation. A teacher needs to teach the student not only important information but also how to think, what to think, how to discriminate between good and bad, and how to appreciate the good. It is also imperative to promote creativity and unveil hidden potentials in the student. The teachers must not only possess the requisite knowledge but also know the technique of curriculum transaction. Vivekananda said

"The only true teacher is he who can immediately come down to the level of the student, and transfer his soul to the student's soul, and see through the student's eyes, and hear through the student's ear, and learn through the student's mind. Only that teacher can really teach and no one else." This type of teaching quality needs courage, conviction and confidence to continuously pursue 'teaching profession' at all costs.

The responsibilities of an ideal teacher are to:

- Demonstrate, persuade and inspire the pupil to discover his potentials, abilities and talents.
- Properly understand their mind, body and spirit.
- Love, affection and empathy.
- Leading by example, living a value-based life.
- Dedication and commitment to the cause of education.
- Understanding of the scriptures.

We can compare these views with the prevailing situation today. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) said, "The teacher is a necessary evil. Let us have as few people as possible between the productive minds and the hungry and recipient minds. The middlemen almost unconsciously adulterate the food which they supply. It is because of teachers that so little is learned, and that so badly."

The need of application of Vivekananda's philosophy is felt more when we listen to John Fowles (1926-2005) saying, "Our present educational systems are all paramilitary. Their aim is to produce servants or soldiers who obey without question and who accept their training as the best possible training. Those who are most successful in the state are those who have the most interest in prolonging the state as it is; they are also those who have the most say in the educational system."

To explain the duty of a teacher, Swamiji refers to the growth of a plant. In the case of a plant, one cannot do anything more than supplying it with water, air and manure while it grows by its own nature. So is the case with a child. Vivekananda's method of education resembles the heuristic method of the modern educationists. In this system, the teacher invokes the spirit of inquiry in the pupil who is supposed to find out things for himself under the bias-free guidance of the teacher.

## PRINCIPLES OF MORALITY AND ETHICS

Today's prevalent morality is based on fear - fear of the police, fear of public reaction, fear of God's punishment, fear of next life, etc. The current theories of ethics also do not explain why a person should be moral and be good to others. Vivekananda has given a new theory of ethics and new principle of morality based on the intrinsic purity and oneness of the soul. We should be pure because purity is our real nature, our true divine soul. Similarly, we should love and serve our neighbors because we are all

one in the Supreme Spirit known as 'Paramatma.'

Swamiji has taught Indians how to master Western Technology and nurture Indian Spiritually. Swamiji has taught Indians how to adapt Western humanism (the ideas of personal liberty, social equality, justice and respect for women) to Indian ethos. He made the Western people realize that they had to learn much from Indian spirituality for their own well-being. He showed that, in spite of her poverty and backwardness, India had a great contribution to make to world culture. He was India's first modern educational and cultural ambassador to the West.

On Swamiji's contribution, Netaji Subhash (1897-1945) said: "Swamiji harmonized the East and the West, religion and science, past and present. And that is why he is great. Our countrymen have gained unprecedented self-respect and self assertion from his teachings."

Swamiji's most unique contribution to the cause of education was to open the minds of Indians to their duty to women and downtrodden masses. Long before the ideas of Karl Marx (1818-1883) were known in India, he spoke about the role of the laboring classes in the production of the country's wealth. He once said, "So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense pays no heed to them." He was the first modern religious leader in India to speak for the masses, formulate a definite philosophy of service, and organize large scale educational social service system. He said, "They alone live, who live for others. The rest are more dead than alive."

## RELEVANCE OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

The tremendous explosion of information without commensurate wisdom, and immense power not tempered with compassion, tolerance, ethics or humility has made today's education a potential source of disaster. On this, Swamiji remarked, "Hundreds of sciences have been discovered. The sole effect is that a few have made slaves of many. That is all the good that has been done. Artificial wants have been created. Every poor man, whether he has money or not, desires to have those wants fulfilled. When he can not, he struggles and dies in that struggle."

Those prophetic predictions are truer today. Today's education not only neglects training of mind but also negates all spiritual values. Brains are stuffed with indiscriminate information. Education no longer stimulates one's thinking process. This obscures assimilation of information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom. A moving storehouse of information is more encouraged today than cultivated humanity. On this, the visionary lamented, "Proper education is yet to be started in today's world. And civilization has begun nowhere yet." He conceived civilization as 'manifestation of the divine within all individuals of the society'. Unfortunately, till

date, no society has made much progress into it. Morality is more lacking amongst the educated privileged few. Gentleness, comparison, tolerance have disappeared.

One of the most significant contributions of Swami Vivekananda to the modern world is his interpretation of religion and spirituality as the core of education. Swamiji met the challenge of modern sciences by showing that religion is as scientific as science itself; religion is the science of consciousness. As such, religion and science are not contradictory to each other but are complementary. This universal conception frees religion from the hold superstitions, dogmatism, conflicts, ethnic confrontations and intolerance. It makes spirituality the highest and noblest pursuit - the pursuit of supreme emancipation, supreme knowledge, and supreme bliss.

Vivekananda's concept of 'potential divinity of the soul' gives a new concept of universal humanity. Today, the degradation of man has been going on apace, as witnessed by the enormous increase in broken homes, immorality, violence, religious conflicts, wars, addiction, crime, etc. Vivekananda's concept of potential divinity of the soul prevents this degradation, divinizes human relationships, and makes life meaningful and worth living. Swamiji has laid the foundation for 'Spiritual Humanism'.

Swamiji's mission of empowerment of the unprivileged through spiritual education is echoed in his speech, "teach yourself, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity."

Swamiji's vision of education is life-building, man-making and character-building. His vision of an ideal man is where "all the elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion and work are blended equally." Values, ethics, morality, compassion, tolerance, secularity are higher in his agenda of education. Century later (1973), UNESCO report 'Learning to be' defines education in the same light. It reads, "The physical, intellectual, ethical and emotional integration of the individual into a complete man is the broad definition of the aim of education."

There is a remarkable similarity between present concerns of the World and Swami Vivekananda's educational objectives:

- His propagation of humanity in education, thus propagating universality of values, secularism, and tolerance as 'character'.
- His preaching of compassion and love, finding God in the sufferers, and also in every living soul.
- His struggle for the poor, underprivileged and destitute - social equality.
- His idea of 'education for all' - free and compulsory mass education.

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