

The Universal Ideal of Emerson & Vivekananda

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Abstract

The word Universal brings under its purview views, ideologies and philosophies which are applicable to the whole existence. These ideologies have the capacity to modify and transform our lives for the better or for the worse. One of these life changing concepts is that of Education. Since times unknown to humanity, education has been imparted voluntarily and involuntarily to beings on Earth. But what does the word actually mean? Does the education being given today serve any purpose? In the current times, the meaning of the word has undergone a change from being a purely humanitarian activity to being a business. What should be the pattern of education which should be prescribed for the younger generation? This paper tries to answer these questions. It also talks about two well known mystics, educators and philosophers of their day, Swami Vivekananda and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who gave their views on imparting a holistic education to the learners to ensure their physical, spiritual and mental well being. This paper will talk about the Transcendental and Vedantic view of the concept of education to find out that how far these are apt in today's times.

Keywords: Education, Purpose, ideologies, existence, Holistic

Overcrowded classrooms, stifling environment and rote memorisation – these are the things by which education of today is identified with. At present the imparting of education is just being done to make learners fend for themselves, to earn more money, to go overseas and learn to live a mechanistic lifestyle. Parents are often seen comparing their kids to the next one and asking him not to lag behind in his studies, Tutorial classes, extra classes, have become a very common phenomenon. The race of getting good marks has driven people crazy and they are getting crazier day by day. But the question arises as to whether we are able to give to the child what he wants to learn; whether we are able to pay attention to all aspects of his well being, of his personality or are we just turning him into a robot. Are we just preparing him to have a great career ahead or also letting him inculcate the values of honesty, peace, kindness, perseverance and truthfulness within himself?

The issue of the real education of a child has been dealt with by many philosophers of their day. The most prominent among them were Swami Vivekananda and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who gave a wholesome view of human nature and chalked out a plan of real education that should be imparted in schools.

A glimpse into the background of these two thinkers gives us ample insight as to their interest in the subject. Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on 25th May 1803. His parents, especially his father, the Reverend William Emerson was a minister at the First Church of

Boston and was a strict disciplinarian. He tried to instil in his sons a degree of moral virtue and a sense of right and wrong. He was a polished gentleman, purely Puritanical in his approach. Ralph Waldo Emerson's mother was a devout Christian lady. Before her marriage she used to keep a diary whence she would record her spiritual progress (Allen, 1981). She prayed for Divine assistance in strengthening her spirit. Even after her marriage to Ralph Waldo Emerson's father, she would retire to her room, every morning after breakfast - to pray, meditate and for soul-searching. Emerson developed a fondness for reading and accumulating knowledge. Another major factor in Emerson's growing years was the influence of his eccentric aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. It was she who developed in him a love for books and wisdom. Emerson had his own views concerning different issues of his age. He has been known as a prophet of nature. Even when he was young he took little interest in the education provided inside classrooms but was rather a proponent of wisdom and knowledge that one learns outside the class.

In his lifetime, Emerson was concerned with education in the capacity of a preacher, a teacher, a lecturer, and overseer of Harvard College. As such, every essay of his is a lesson, every sermon is a chapter, every lecture - a living example of his life and struggles. Emerson had great faith in the power of education to make men civilized. To make real men was the purpose of the Universe, and to make perfect, real men was the purpose of education.

Emerson's deep insight knew that education is the means through which humans can lift themselves to a higher level of existence. Education, to him, meant growth in a person's innate abilities. He spoke highly of education and about schools. In his words, "Humanly speaking, the school, the college, society make the difference between men. . . ." (Caney, 1940, p.90).

As in his other treatises, Emerson stresses on an individual, in his educational philosophy too. He gave stress on an individual's creativity and learning in his own way, at his own pace. Every person, he declared, is a new will in the world. He is not to repeat the experience of others, or to meet the wishes of his parents or teachers. Education must let him be himself. He said, "Nature has her own designs. The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. . . . He holds the key to his own secret. . . . By too much governing he may be hindered from his own ends. Respect the child" (Good, 1949, p.10).

Emerson believed that men were created to be victorious over things and education evokes this victory. Man can use every material thing in this world, but he should keep in mind that these become useless, if man, after proving his Mastery over them, allows them to become his slaves. Emerson also emphasised the role of 'home' as the first school in human life. He is of the opinion that, "the household is a school of power. There within the door, learn the tragic-comedy of human life" (Caney, 1940, p.91).

Being a non-conformist and a lover of nature, Emerson lays stress on the fact that a child's true education should strictly be according to his own nature. He should not be made to conform to ideas arrived at, by somebody else, rather he should be made capable to interpret things on his own, and arrive at his own ideas and conclusions regarding them, without any external assistance. Pointing towards imitators and people who just copy other peoples' ideas, he says in his well known essay, 'The American Scholar', "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke,

which Bacon, have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books” (Richardson, 2007, p. 87).

In his essay on ‘Education’, Emerson states that, “education should be as broad as man” (Heathcote, 1927, p.554). This means that true education, according to him was at the same time man worthy, spiritual and aspirational. Real education should make pupils open not only their eyes and ears but also their minds so that they can see things in a new light and with a new perspective. The student should also be made to trust his own instincts and be self reliant. He should be made receptive and aware of the vast amount of knowledge which lies within him. The imparting of such an education will inculcate in the pupil a sense of self-trust. He writes, “Let us apply to this subject the light of the same torch by which we have looked at all the phenomena of the time; the infinitude, namely, of every man. Everything teaches that” (Heathcote, 1927, p. 554).

Emerson stresses on the ‘Natural Method’ for the instruction of pupils. Education through nature is more effective than the sophisticated education imparted through costly machines. There develops in a pupil, an enthusiasm to learn things when he is taught naturally. Emerson says, “The farm is the right school. The reason for my deep respect for the farmer is that he is a realist, and not a dictionary. The farm is a piece of the world, the school is not. The farm, by training the physical, rectifies and invigorates the metaphysical and moral nature” (Good, 1949, p.13).

Education, according to Emerson, should not only aim at making men equal to themselves. It should, instead, aim at making men surpass their limits and become all that they are capable of becoming. The whole personality of man should undergo a change as a result of him being educated. Education should not produce lopsided individuals who are proficient in only one area or field. He says:

The great object of Education should be commensurate with the object of life. It should be a moral one; to teach self-trust: to inspire the youthful man with an interest in himself; with a curiosity touching his own nature; to acquaint him with the resources of his mind, and to teach him that there is all his strength, and to inflame him with a piety toward the Grand Mind in which he lives. (Caney, 1940, p. 94)

Emerson holds that the methods of nature hold true even for a teacher. They should treat the pupils as carriers of the message of truth and beauty to the world. As such, every child, every student needs to be dealt with patience. Teachers should possess this quality so as to make the pupils aware of their hidden qualities.

Swami Vivekananda’s theory of Education occupies an important place amidst all his theories. He believed that education is the manifestation of the perfection already in men. For him, education was not only the theoretical knowledge being imparted, but it had to be something more meaningful. He realised that the education system prevailing in his time was far from being satisfactory as it did not enable a person

to stand on his own feet and also did not give him confidence to face the world. He felt that education should be man making, life giving and character building.

Swami Vivekananda regarded a child to have an innate storehouse of knowledge, talents and abilities. He emphasised that the role of education should be to draw out these inherent capacities of an individual. He said, “Whatever a man knows, should, in strict

psychological language be what he discovers or unveils. What a man 'learns' is really what he discovers by taking the cover off his soul" (*Complete Works*, 8: 28).

Swami Vivekananda stressed on the need for imparting a positive education to a child. By this, he meant an education that stresses on the development of each aspect of a child's personality – physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual. He said that a child's education, "must take into account the development of a healthy body, a proper control of sense impulses and instincts, the acquirement of knowledge, sublimation and proper direction of feeling and sentiment, development of the will and the sense of duty" (Yatiswarananda, 1995, p. 384).

Swami Vivekananda was unlike those philosophers and intellectuals who merely talked about giving a dry, baseless education. He observed that a solid concept like education requires a firm base - and he attributed this base to religion. In his words, "Every improvement in India requires first of all an upheaval in religion. 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 the people" (Nirvedananda, 2012, p. 36-37).

The use of the word religion here did not mean any specific religion, but a universal one. Swami Vivekananda stressed on the advancement of the spirit or soul as the main goal of a holistic system of education.

Swami Vivekananda's concept of education is closely linked to his concept of the *Vedanta*. The *Vedanta* philosophy says that the main cause of man's agony is that he is oblivious to his own true nature. He is not a sinner but is a mere plaything in the hands of circumstances. He said, "The Light Divine is obscured in most people. It is like a lamp in a cask of iron, no gleam of light can shine through" (Vivekananda, 2011, p.18-19).

At a more empirical level, the concept of perfection pertains to the various problems encountered by human beings in the society. In his book 'My Idea of Education', Swami Vivekananda says that, "The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out the strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion -, is it worth the name? Real education is that which enables one to stand on one's own legs" (Vivekananda, 2011, p.19).

According to Swami Vivekananda, the ideal of education should be to create an integrated person – one who has learned how to improve his intellect, purify his emotions, and stand tall on his moral virtues and values.

While discussing the ideal system of education, Swami Vivekananda also expressed his deep concern to enable the education system to provide and facilitate social justice. According to him, the education system should take on two responsibilities:

1. It should help a person develop a healthy frame of mind.
2. It should, through proper training, try to prevent any future evils in people and society.

The teachers and educational administrators should always keep in mind the *Vedantic* ideal of man being essentially pure and a storehouse of immense possibilities.

Swami Vivekananda's ideal system of education also had as its major source of strength the training of the mind and the senses. Mere learning and repetition of facts should not be done but the mind should be so trained that it concentrates only on the topic at hand instead of being distracted. Learning to concentrate the mind was the topmost priority of Swami Vivekananda. He said, "To me the very essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collection of facts" (Vivekananda, 2011, p. 22). In this way the student trains his mind to be more attentive and more 'mindful'.

The student must also learn how to dissociate and detach his mind from distractions so that he is able to focus on the desired subject with the full force of his mind. Swami Vivekananda also wanted the pupil to cultivate will-power, which is so essential to carry out any task. In order to put his innate strength and inherent abilities to work, he should cultivate the spirit of '*Sraddha*'- that is, faith in himself, humility and reverence for the teacher. This will also create a favourable environment for learning. The teacher pupil relationship is the pillar of Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of education.

Apart from this, Swami Vivekananda also tried to work on his Master's saying which said that the real man is one whose spirituality has been awakened. Being himself a stalwart of spirituality, Swami Vivekananda emphasized that the ideal of all education, all training should be man making. Talking about the prevalent education system he said that we are always trying to polish up the outside and that there is no use in polishing up the outside when there is no inside. Thus according to him, the end and aim of all training is to make man develop a wholesome personality.

Swami Vivekananda stressed on character building on an individual rather than career orientation. He was of the firm opinion that a person's thoughts create him. Therefore, he stressed on character-building thoughts to be implanted in a person's mind, which would help shape his character in a positive manner. This type of education might also focus on teaching what is right and wrong. But, in the long run, it would do well if we teach a pupil how to decide what is right and wrong. Active participation in discussions relating to topics of morality is highly desirable in this context. Rather than instructing a pupil, teaching by setting an example would be more beneficial and would also have a lasting impression on the minds of the learners.

Today, we stand at the threshold of an information explosion. The internet era is at its full swing. Pupils can extract any information within a fraction of second with the help of the powerful tools of mass media. In such a case, it becomes imperative to guide pupils into what is good and bad for them. They should also be taught to exercise their power of discretion at all times so that their mind does not become corrupted. At the same time they should also know how to tame their senses so that they can redirect their energy towards constructive pursuits.

Conclusion

The *Vedantic* concept of education as envisaged by Swami Vivekananda chalked out guidelines for the full and complete education of an individual. The Transcendentalist instruction, on its own part, envisioned to make a human being realise his true self, his inner self. Both these paths lay down a colossal structure, which, if followed religiously will prove to be the hallmarks of a world education, a universal education.

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