

Swami Vivekananda's Education – Manifestation of Perfection

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Abstract

Swami Vivekananda has provided an all-inclusive, comprehensive definition of education in a single pithy sentence. In a letter written from Chicago on 3 March 1894 to one of his very close disciples Singaravelu Mudaliar, Assistant Professor of Science, Christian College, Madras, who was also fondly called by Swamiji, Vivekananda writes: "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man." The word 'manifestation' obviously implies that something is pre-existent. Therefore, Swamiji says that knowledge does not come from outside, it is already existing, it is inherent. The human soul is an infinite storehouse of knowledge and Swamiji was of the opinion that what a man learns is actually what he/she discovers or unveils by taking off the cover from his/her own soul. 'Manifestation' means removing the obstacles and impediments to facilitate spontaneous growth or development. The phrase 'already in man' refers to the potentiality, the abilities, and talents with which a man is born. These abilities may be known or unknown, hidden or revealed, but the goal of education is to discover and nurture the abilities. So potentiality means to discover the already existing qualities which might be in a dormant position. The word 'perfection' is of equal importance. Perfect suggests a sense of completion and the idea of attaining a goal. So perfection means the goal of reaching the highest human potential. Education is the path to reach the highest potential. Education helps in the all round development of body, mind, and soul and Swami Vivekananda emphasized on man-making education. He stressed on "life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas." The purpose of education should be to serve the entire humanity at large and hence learning should be a lifelong and continuous process. Swamiji had got this idea from his Master who said "As long as I live, so long do I learn." Not only India but even many developed countries of the world are now emphasizing on Continuing Education which Swamiji had dreamt more than hundred years back.

Keywords: Manifestation, Perfection, Already in man, inherent will power, Continuing education

Swami Vivekananda, the most devout monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, was born on 12 January 1863 at Simla in north Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Vishwanath Dutta and Bhuvaneshwari Devi. He was the founder of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Vivekananda was a monk whose main objective was the uplift of mankind at large. But he believed that no race or nation can prosper without true education. So he had emphasized on

education the most. But he did not write a treatise on education. He had delivered lectures at various places, written letters, and held informal talks with his followers and from these sources we get a picture of the educational philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. He was perhaps the first of the modern Indians who suggested that education is the panacea for all the maladies. He knew that it was true education which was the most important necessity for the then India. India cannot develop without proper education. Though himself a sannyasin, his educational philosophy is so modern that he is regarded as one of the four greatest India thinkers on education, the other three being Rabindranath, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi. He is also named in the same breath with the great educationists of the world like Rousseau, Dewey, or Montessori. His views on education are more relevant and need to be implemented today than probably during his own life time. Swamiji has provided an all-inclusive, comprehensive definition of education in a single pithy sentence. In a letter written from Chicago on 3 March 1894 to one of his very close disciples Singaravelu Mudaliar, Assistant Professor of Science, Christian College, Madras, who was also fondly called by Swamiji, Vivekananda writes: "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man" (*Letters*, 70). This seemingly simple definition is actually heavily laden with ideas. The words 'manifestation', 'perfection', and the phrase 'already in man' need analysis from different perspectives. According to Vivekananda, our goal is to attain knowledge. The word 'manifestation' obviously implies that something is pre-existent. Therefore, Swamiji says that knowledge does not come from outside, it is already existing, it is inherent. The human soul is an infinite storehouse of knowledge and Swamiji was of the opinion that what a man learns is actually what he/she discovers or unveils by taking off the cover from his/her own soul. With the help of the story of the discovery of Newton's Law of Gravitation, Swamiji explains that the human mind is the infinite library of the universe, and that all knowledge comes from the mind itself. Newton had seen the apple fall from the tree in the garden. This event suggested Newton to study his own mind. He rearranged in his mind all the previous links of thoughts and discovered a new link which he called gravitation. The falling of the apple helped as a catalyst to study his own mind. It was a suggestion from the external world. The gravitation was neither in the apple, nor in the garden, nor in the centre of the earth. It was in Newton's own mind. All knowledge is in the minds of men, undiscovered and covered. When the cover is gradually taken off, the knowledge is discovered and it is said, "We are learning" (*CW I*, 28). Knowledge gradually advances by this process of uncovering. "The man from whom this veil is being lifted is the more knowing man, the man upon whom it lies thick is ignorant, and the man from whom it has entirely gone is all-knowing, omniscient" (*CW I*, 28). According to the Vedanta philosophy, all knowledge is inherent in man. "Like fire in a piece of flint, knowledge exists in the mind; suggestion is the friction which brings it out" (*CW I*, 28). So 'manifestation' means removing the obstacles and impediments to facilitate spontaneous growth or development. Therefore, manifestation is a spontaneous growth to remove all the impediments. This knowledge, according to the Vedanta, leads the mind from dishonesty to honesty, from ignorance to light, and from mortality to immortality. It is the duty of the teacher or the facilitator to remove all obstructions from the way of the learners. "No one was ever really taught by another; each of us has to teach himself. The external teacher offers only the suggestion which rouses the internal teacher to work to understand things" (*CW I*, 93). The teacher is supposed to take the

starting-point of the learner or the student and should enable the learner to develop along his or her own line. Viekananda was of the view that the inherent will power of a man spontaneously manifests itself if the external and internal barriers or impediments are removed by the teacher. Swamiji draws an analogy to explain the word ‘manifestation’. He says that just as a farmer breaks the barriers to a course of water to irrigate the fields and the water flows itself according to its own force, similarly, it is the inherent will power of a man which will manifest spontaneously under favourable conditions. “External obstacles might be in the form of unfair distribution of educational resources and opportunities, inequalities in economic development and socio-political instability; whereas internal obstacles might have to do with the dynamics of the education system, such as the teacher-student relationship, the student’s capacity to make personal judgements or to adapt to changes, and the student’s mental or physical capacities.

In order to tackle these obstacles, the education system should take on two responsibilities:

- a) It should help a person build a healthy and dynamic frame of mind to enable him to meet the challenges of life; and
- b) It should try to prevent, through proper training of its present students, any future evils in people and society which are likely to further complicate the problems of human beings” (*My Idea of Education*, 21).

Swamiji says that society often threatens the freedom of human beings and thereby hampers the educational growth as freedom is an essential condition for education.

The phrase ‘already in man’ refers to the potentiality, the abilities, and talents with which a man is born. These abilities may be known or unknown, hidden or revealed, but the goal of education is to discover and nurture the abilities. So potentiality means to discover the already existing qualities which might be in a dormant position. Israel Scheffler in his book *Of Human Potential* refers to three aspects of human potentiality:

- a) the capacity – that is to acquire some specific quality of someone or to become like someone who possesses that specific quality. For example it might be said that he has the potential to be a Tendulkar or a Messi::
- b) the propensity – it is a quality which indicates that what a man can do if freedom and opportunity is available to him or her. It also refers to one’s own motivation.
- c) the capacity – it refers to one’s own motivation and efficiency to carry out a certain work. It may be also referred to as the power to remove the impediments and the capacity to perform.

“Thus, these three concepts – capacity, propensity and capability – emphasize three aspects of education, respectively:

- a) That which makes learning possible;
- b) The development of learning; and
- c) Self-development or self-empowerment” (*My Idea of Education*, 18).

The word ‘perfection’ is of equal importance. Perfect suggests a sense of completion and the idea of attaining a goal. So perfection means the goal of reaching the highest human potential. Education is the path to reach the highest potential. The goal of education is laid down by the society, therefore, the word ‘perfection’ needs to be viewed from the perspective of Indian society and culture and should be analyzed at two levels:

- a) Metaphysical Level – In the metaphysical sense, perfection means the realization of the perfect nature of the soul. According to the Vedanta philosophy, man suffers because of the ignorance of the true nature. Swamiji explains it:

“The Light Divine within is obscured in most people. It is like a lamp in a cask of iron, no gleam of light can shine through. Gradually, by purity and unselfishness we can make the obscuring medium less and less dense, until at last it becomes as transparent as glass” (CW VII, 20).

- b) Empirical level – Perfection at the empirical level has to take into account the problems faced by human beings in the society. In this respect Swamiji says:

“The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out 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” (CW VII, 141).

Education helps in the all round development of body, mind, and soul and Swami Vivekananda emphasized on man-making education. He lamented that true education was not yet conceived in India then and perhaps the condition is even worse today. Education in India at that time meant to cram a lot of information into the brain to run riots there and remain undigested all through the life. He stressed on “life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas” (CW III, 302). If one assimilates five ideas and makes them their life and character, then he or she has “more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library” (CW III, 302). He believed that education and information are not identical. Had it been so then the libraries and encyclopaedias would be the greatest scholars, sages, or Rishis. “I never define anything” said Swamiji, but as regards to education, he said, “still, it may be described as a development of faculty, not an accumulation of words, or as a training of individuals to will rightly and efficiently” (CW V, 231). To Swami Vivekananda education was positive teaching and not the prevalent system of learning where maximum emphasis is laid on memorizing the facts.. Education is not merely book-learning. It is not even diverse knowledge. Education is a training to control the expression of will. That is not education which gradually makes man a machine or chokes the will by force. Swamiji wanted “that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s own feet” (CW V, 342).

Education is the panacea of all the maladies and evils of the society. But people should be taught to use it themselves. Otherwise development would be stalled and the purpose of education would never be fulfilled. Education should teach people to be self-reliant. The purpose

of education should be to serve the entire humanity at large and hence learning should be a lifelong and continuous process. Swamiji had got this idea from his Master who said “As long as I live, so long do I learn.” Not only India but even many developed countries of the world are now emphasizing on Continuing Education which Swamiji had dreamt more than hundred years back. Truly educated men would be able to realize what is good and what is bad for them. Swamiji realized that education creates the difference not only between man and man but even among nations. He observes:

“Education, education, education alone! Travelling through many cities of Europe and observing in them the comforts and education of even the poor, there was brought to my mind the state of our own people, and I used to shed tears. What made the difference? Education was the answer I got” (*Letters*, 329).

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