
PROFILES OF FAMOUS EDUCATORS

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

1863–1902

Swami Prabhananda

A regal, majestic figure of commanding presence, vast learning and deep insight, Swami Vivekananda was barely 30 years old when he created a stir at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Three and a half years later, when he returned to India, his homeland, it was as a colossus of strength, courage, confidence, love and manliness – the embodiment of the ideal of the 'man-making and character-building' education he propagated.

Swami Vivekananda was born Narendranath Datta on 12 January 1863 in Calcutta in a respectable middle-class family. His father, Viswanath Datta, was an attorney and was a lover of the arts and literature. Although liberal-minded, Viswanath was sceptical about religious practices. On the other hand, Narendra's mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, was a pious, kind-hearted lady, devoted to the Hindu traditions. The influence of each of his parents on Narendra was different, yet together they provided a congenial atmosphere for the precocious boy to grow into an energetic young man with high ideals.

During his formative years he developed extraordinary mental abilities which some people either misunderstood or ignored, but which others appreciated and took as signs of an outstanding individual. As a child he liked to play at meditation and would

Original language: English

Swami Prabhananda (India)

Completed his university education in 1956 and took final monastic vows with the Ramakrishna Order in 1966. He has served in several educational institutions run by the Order – as headmaster, principal or secretary – besides doing some rural development work. In 1983 the Swami became a trustee of the Ramakrishna Order, and is now head of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta. His research work on Sri Ramakrishna and the history of the Order is well recognized. He has written fourteen books in Bengali and three in English, besides contributing many articles to various journals. E-mail: rmic@vsnl.com; rmicl@giascl01.vsnl.net.in.

Prospects, vol. XXXIII, no. 2, June 2003

easily become engrossed. Once when he was seated thus in meditation along with some of his friends, the sudden appearance of a cobra slithering across the floor drove all of the children out of the room except Narendra, who remained absorbed in meditation.

Narendra's power of concentration – of fixing his mind on one thing while detaching it from everything else – was remarkable. In his later life he once shot in succession twelve eggshells bobbing up and down on the water of a river, although he had never fired a gun before. No less striking was his self-control. He remained calm and unruffled, no matter how dramatic the situation he was in.

Ever since childhood, Narendra had had great admiration for wandering monks, and he liked to think that one day he himself would become a monk. But his ambition only became evident during his college days at the Scottish Church College. He began to search out scholars and spiritual leaders in order to question them. But none of them could satisfy him. It was from William Hastie, principal of his college, that he heard for the first time of Sri Ramakrishna, the saint of Dakshineswar. His meeting with Sri Ramakrishna in November 1881 proved to be a turning point in his life. About this meeting, Narendranath said:

He [Sri Ramakrishna] looked just like an ordinary man, with nothing remarkable about him. He used the most simple language and I thought 'Can this man be a great teacher?' – I crept near to him and asked him the question which I had been asking others all my life: 'Do you believe in God, Sir?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'Can you prove it, Sir?' 'Yes.' 'How?' 'Because I see Him just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense.' That impressed me at once. [. . .] I began to go to that man, day after day, and I actually saw that religion could be given. One touch, one glance, can change a whole life (*CW*, vol. IV, p. 179).

Ramakrishna's life was one of spiritual experience and achievement. He also discovered some truths of great social significance. About the latter Ramakrishna said:

I have practised all religions – Hinduism, Islam, Christianity – and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths (*Gospel*, 35).

Sri Ramakrishna carefully guided Narendra and a band of other young dedicated disciples, and the Master chose Narendra as the leader of the group. After the Master's passing away, these young devotees gathered together in a dilapidated house in Baranagore, a northern suburb of Calcutta, which became the first centre of the Ramakrishna Order. With a total rejection of material possessions and an unshakable commitment to their Master and his teachings, they endured unbelievable privations and devoted themselves to spiritual practices.

Travelling throughout the length and breadth of India, mostly on foot, Narendra was trying to work out a purpose for his life. While on the road, he often faced starvation and frequently found himself with nowhere to stay. To Narendra, this was an opportunity to study India and its needs at first hand. He observed that his country possessed a priceless spiritual heritage, but had failed to reap the benefit of it. The

weak points were poverty, caste, neglect of the masses, oppression of women and a faulty system of education. How was India to be regenerated? He came to the conclusion:

We have to give back to the nation its lost individuality and *raise the masses*. [. . .] Again, the force to raise them must come from inside (*CW*, vol. VI, p. 255).

Narendranath Datta had by this time been transformed into Swami Vivekananda, and he had found his life's mission. Taking a broad look at the early part of his life we can see that there were four influences that formed his personality and philosophy:

1. India was then under British rule and was experiencing an upheaval in its cultural life. British rule had brought India into the world community, and English education and modernization had brought new hope. Yet, reflecting on the actual result of all this, Vivekananda said, 'A few hundred, modernised, half-educated, and denationalised men are all that there is to show of modern English India – *nothing else*' (*CW*, vol. VIII, p. 476). In his youth, Narendra 'became fascinated with the Evolutionism of Herbert Spencer', and 'translated Spencer's book on "Education" into Bengali for Gurudas Chattopadhyaya, his publisher' (Datta, 1993, pp. 88, 286). It is also said that Narendra exchanged correspondence with Herbert Spencer for some time (Gambhirananda, 1996, vol. I, p. 74). But, alongside his study of Spencer and other Western philosophers, he also delved deep into Indian Sanskrit scriptures.
2. Sri Ramakrishna, the saint of Dakshineswar, had a profound influence on his contemporaries who were considered the builders of modern India. He was practically illiterate and spoke in a rustic dialect, yet the spiritual depth and power of his teachings impressed intellectual giants such as Friederich Max Müller. In Swami Vivekananda's estimation, his Master fully harmonized the intellectual, emotional, ethical and spiritual elements of a human being and was the role model for the future.
3. Swami Vivekananda's family also provided a strong moral and cultural foundation to his life. Due in great part to his upbringing, his tastes were eclectic and his interests wide. In fact, the desire he had acquired in his youth for knowledge prompted him later to gather as much as he could wherever he was – whether in India or in the West.
4. Equally important, if not more so, was the Swami's knowledge of India based on his first-hand experiences acquired during his wanderings throughout the country. His pilgrimages transformed him. He became a true lover of humanity and became endowed with the quality of *sarvabhutahite ratah* (being devoted to the welfare of all beings).¹

At about the same time that Vivekananda completed his tour of India, he was asked to represent Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions, to be held that year (1893) in Chicago. Vivekananda also felt that this might give him an opportunity to do something for his country, so he agreed to go. When the Parliament of Religions convened in September 1893, Vivekananda created a sensation. While other delegates spoke of their own faiths and creeds, Vivekananda spoke of the God of all, the

source and essence of every faith. His call for religious harmony and acceptance of all religions brought him great acclaim. When the Parliament was over, he went on a lecture tour in the Midwest and the East coast of the United States. People came in large numbers to hear him speak wherever he went, particularly intellectuals, thus fulfilling his Master's prediction that he would some day become a 'world teacher'.

Vivekananda's tour of the United States also had a revitalizing effect on India. Previously, those who had gone to the West from India were full of apologies for the state of their country. He was not. He always spoke about his country with pride and respect. Thus, his work in the West instilled self-respect and self-confidence in the Indian psyche and helped India in its search for identity. It also helped to overcome the stereotypes and deep-rooted prejudices about India in Westerners' minds.

After giving up his lecture tour, the Swami started giving free classes on Vedanta and Yoga in New York. This resulted in the founding of the Vedanta Society there. In the summer of 1895 he sailed for England at the invitation of E.T. Sturdy and Henrietta Müller. His lectures there were quite successful. In December 1895 Vivekananda returned to the United States, where he continued his classes in New York and also lectured in other cities, and then returned to Europe again in April 1896. In May 1896, the Swami met Max Müller and his wife at Oxford. At the end of December 1896, Vivekananda sailed to India from Europe.

When the news broke that Swami Vivekananda was returning to India, people all over the country prepared to give him a hero's welcome. The Swami arrived in South India in January 1897 accompanied by three of his Western disciples. Everywhere he went addresses of welcome were presented and multitudes gathered to see him. In Vivekananda's response to these addresses, he indicated that he had a plan in mind to help uplift the masses. In fact, as early as 24 December 1894, he had written in a letter, 'My whole ambition in life is to set in motion a machinery which will bring noble ideas to the door of everybody, and then let men and women settle their own fate' (*CW*, vol. V, p. 29).

On 1 May 1897, a few months after his return to Calcutta, the Swami set his plan in motion when he founded the Ramakrishna Mission. This was the beginning of an organized movement to help the suffering masses through educational, cultural, medical and relief work. Within a few weeks of the founding of the Ramakrishna Mission, one of Swami Vivekananda's brother disciples, Swami Akhandananda, was passing through Murshidabad in Bengal and was struck by the pitiful condition of the people there who were suffering from a famine. He immediately started relief work. Since then the Ramakrishna Mission has continued to come to the aid of those suffering from natural or man-made calamities.

It may not be out of place to mention that in a speech made in 1993, Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, stated:

I am indeed struck by the similarity of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission which Vivekananda established as early as 1897 with that of UNESCO drawn up in 1945. Both place the human being at the centre of their efforts aimed at development. Both place tolerance at the top of the agenda for building peace and democracy. Both recognize the variety of human cultures and societies as an essential aspect of the common heritage.²

About two years after Vivekananda's return to India, the centre, which his brother disciples had managed while he was in the West, was transferred to a large piece of land at Belur, across the river from Calcutta. This became the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda emphasized that the aim of the mission was 'man-making', and he wanted it eventually to develop a university as part of its mission. About this time the Swami received a letter requesting him to head the Research Institute of Science that Sir Jamshedji Tata had set up, but he declined the offer as it conflicted with his spiritual interests.³

In June 1899, he returned to Europe with one of his brother disciples and also Sister Nivedita, an Irish disciple. After a short stay in London, Vivekananda sailed for New York. A few months later he left for California where a series of lectures and classes led to the founding of the Vedanta Society in San Francisco. He eventually returned to New York, but in July 1900 went to Paris, where he stayed for three months. During this time he participated in the Congress of the History of Religions, held in connection with the Universal Exposition.

The Swami returned to Calcutta on 9 December 1900. For the most part he spent his last days at the Belur centre training his young followers and guiding the organization. He expected his followers to be exemplars of an ideal type of human being, and he inspired them by saying:

Tell me what you have done. Couldn't you give away one life for the sake of others? [. . .]
Let this body go in the service of others – and then I shall know you have not come to me in vain! (Rolland, 1992, p. 166).

On 4 July 1902, he was more vigorous than he had been for a long time, and he busied himself with various activities. In the evening he meditated and left his body, as he himself had predicted, in a high yogic state. He was only 39 years old.

Education – what it means

Sister Nivedita used to say that those who knew Swami Vivekananda understood that he was one who had experienced in his own life all the truths about which he spoke. This is equally valid when he addressed the subject of education. To him education plays a vital role in curing the evils in society, and it is critical in shaping the future of humanity. Although Vivekananda did not write a book on education, he contributed valuable thoughts on the subject that are relevant and viable today. In order to understand his thoughts, we should first consider his oft-quoted definition of education – 'Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man' (*CW*, vol. IV, p. 358).

Vivekananda's definition of education is one of remarkable insight. First of all, the word 'manifestation' implies that something already exists and is waiting to be expressed. The main focus in learning is to make the hidden ability of a learner manifest. As Vivekananda said, 'what a man "learns" is really what he "discovers", by taking the cover off his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge' (*CW*, vol. I, p. 28). According to the Vedanta philosophy, knowledge is inherent in a human being, like a spark in a

piece of flint, and all that is needed is the strike of suggestion to bring it out. 'Manifestation' indicates spontaneous growth, provided that the impediments, if any, are removed.

Next in importance in the Swami's definition of education is the expression 'already in man'. This refers to a human being's potential, which is the range of the abilities and talents, known or unknown, that he was born with. 'Potential' speaks of the possibility of awakening something that is lying dormant. Israel Scheffler, in his book *Of human potential*,⁴ considered three aspects of this: (a) *the capacity* to acquire a specific characteristic or to become someone who possesses it. For instance, we might say, 'Amal has the capacity to become a Maradona, the world-famous soccer player'; (b) *the propensity* – an attribute which indicates what a person is likely to do when the opportunity comes and freedom of choice is available. It suggests something about a person's motivation. For example, Rabindranath Tagore's propensity, expressed in his *Gitanjali*, indicates his strong aspiration to discover the wonder behind this creation; and (c) *the capability* – i.e. a person's motivation and efficiency in working towards an intended outcome. It refers to something more than a person's capacity to perform. Rather, it is a person's strength and capacity to get rid of obstacles to his learning – such as his lack of motivation or the obstacles in his environment.

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.

A child has many potentials of variable worth, and they may create mental conflict within him. Therefore, he has to learn to choose which he should try to develop, and which he should minimize, counter or ignore. Then again, as his chosen potentials start to unfold, they should be supervised in order to achieve their harmonious and purposeful development.

The word 'perfection' in the Swami's definition of education is also very significant. We can see that every act connected with learning, training, etc., is part of a process directed towards an end. The English word 'perfect' implies completion, or something being made whole. The Greek word *teleios* is translated as 'perfect', and suggests the idea of attaining a goal or an end. Drawing on these meanings, one may conclude that perfection in educational parlance is the goal of actualizing the highest human potential.

The goal of education – general or ultimate – is essentially laid down by society and therefore varies from society to society. Even as every society tries to keep pace with the contemporary world, societies with a stable and older tradition cherish some higher goals of everlasting value. Taking into consideration the vast experience of the Indian civilization, Vivekananda's use of the word 'perfection' needs to be viewed at two levels:

1. 'Perfection' in the metaphysical sense implies the realization of the soul's own ever-perfect nature. The Vedanta philosophy says that a human being is not born a sinner, nor is he necessarily a victim of circumstances. The main cause of his suffering is his ignorance of his true nature. Explaining the implications of this, Vivekananda once said:

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 transparent as glass (*CW*, vol. VII, p. 21).

2. At the empirical level the concept of 'perfection' has to address the various problems human beings encounter in society. As Vivekananda said:

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*, vol. VII, pp. 147–148).

Education, he said, must provide 'life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas' (*CW*, vol. III, p. 302). The ideal of this type of education would be to produce an integrated person – one who has learned how to improve his intellect, purify his emotions, and stand firm on moral virtues and unselfishness.

There are two levels designated by the ancient Indian scriptures as *para vidya* (spiritual values) and *apara vidya* (secular values) respectively. This division is merely for practical convenience; otherwise *vidya*, or learning, is a continuum, leading one towards the ultimate goal which, according to Vivekananda, was complete freedom of the soul.

Vivekananda also observed that, if education is to serve the entire human being, in all his/her dimensions, the pursuit of knowledge will be a lifelong process. Even an illustrious being like Sri Ramakrishna said, from his own experience, 'As long as I live, so long do I learn.' At the empirical level, today's knowledge explosion can keep people engaged for their entire lives. Therefore, education must be considered a continuous and lifelong process.

So far, our discussion of Vivekananda's ideas on education has been a simplistic analysis centring round his definition of education. However, this fails to do justice to some of his ideas on related issues, such as the relationship between education and society, between education and the teacher, between the professed goals of education and the goals actually achieved, and so forth. It is apparent, therefore, that Vivekananda's deep concern for social justice has not been reflected so far in our definition.

To this end, we can probe further into the expressions 'manifestation' and 'already in man', bearing in mind the situation in India in those days. In explaining the term 'manifestation', the Swami quoted part of one of the yoga aphorisms of Patanjali (author of an ancient Indian scripture – 4.3) – *Tatah kshetrikavat* [Therefore the obstructions] – that is to say, just as a farmer breaks the barriers to a course of water, which thereafter flows by its own force to irrigate his fields, so also a person's inherent power will spontaneously manifest itself when external and internal obstacles, if any, are removed at the proper time by the teachers or the education system. Such obstacles are of various kinds. 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: (i) it should help a person build a healthy and dynamic frame of mind to enable him to meet the challenges of life; and (ii) 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. At the same time, however, the teachers and the designers of education systems must always keep in mind the Vedantic idea that whatsoever good or bad impressions a mind carries, a human being is essentially pure and divine, and a repository of immense possibilities.

In Vivekananda's view, educational concerns related to a person's interaction with society should receive due attention. The purpose of society is to help secure the well-being of human beings. In reality, however, human beings frequently find themselves entrapped in a society that threatens their freedom, a freedom essential for their educational growth. An ideal society, according to Vivekananda, should provide the resources as well as the opportunity for each of its members to develop his or her potential to the maximum. Education must embrace the whole society, with special attention to those who are most in need of it and who, for one reason or another, are unable to avail themselves of the existing facilities.

Training the mind

Vivekananda concurred with contemporary thinkers when he asserted that the mind – the chief instrument of learning – deserves more attention than it had earlier received. Training the mind should be a student's highest priority, and not simply the accumulation, the memorizing and the repeating of facts. In the long run, stuffing one's mind with information, technical skills and useless trivia only creates more problems if one's mind is not nourished and strengthened and made healthy. Yet training of the mind in all its aspects is conspicuously absent in today's education.

Learning to concentrate the mind was the focus in the Swami's scheme. He said: 'To me the very essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collecting of facts' (*CW*, vol. VI, p. 38). In doing anything – such as thinking, working with the hands, etc. – the better the power of concentration the better the outcome will be. And this power of keeping the mind on the task can be improved. Training the mind to concentrate on a specific subject has several stages, the primary one being learning how to collect the mind and preventing it from running hither and thither. The student trains his mind to be more attentive and more 'mindful'.

Next, the student must learn how to detach his mind from distractions that impose themselves in spite of himself. Then, simultaneously, he must direct the mind on to the desired subject and focus the full force of his mind on it. To give an example: a convex lens gathers sunlight and focuses it on one point to burn a piece of paper. Likewise, when a mind becomes concentrated, it acquires tremendous power and is able to unlock the mysteries of the subject it is focused upon.

Similarly, the Swami also wanted students to cultivate will-power. According to him, will-power is developed when ‘the current and expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful’ (*CW*, vol. IV, p. 490). Will-power is necessary not only to conduct the learning process, but also to strengthen one’s character.

Culture and education – the teacher and the pupil

Every society has its outer aspect called ‘civilization’, and also its inner aspect called ‘culture’. In both of these a child is moulded and educated so that the beliefs and practices of his forefathers are carried on and not forgotten. Nevertheless, as Vivekananda says:

It is culture that withstands shocks, not a simple mass of knowledge. [. . .] Knowledge is only skin-deep, as civilisation is, and a little scratch brings out the old savage (*CW*, vol. III, p. 291).

A society is forever adding to its learning and culture. To the brilliant mind of T.S. Eliot, education was but a manifestation of culture. He said, ‘The purpose of education, it seems, is to transmit culture: so culture is likely to be limited to what can be transmitted by education.’⁵

Similarly, Vivekananda observed that, through education, a child learns a culture and his behaviour is moulded accordingly, and he is thus guided towards his eventual role in society. In this process, several agents – such as his parents, peers and teachers – assist him. But nowadays, as formal education has become more and more institutionalized, teachers are expected to play a more significant role. A teacher needs to help a student learn how to think, what to think, how to discriminate and how to appreciate things. This is not just a matter of intellectual manipulation. This kind of teaching requires moral conviction and the courage to continuously pursue one’s own course at all costs. The teacher must not only possess the knowledge he is to transmit to the student, but he must also know how to transmit it. And, in addition to the content of the teaching, what the teacher gives or transfers, to be truly effective, must possess some other elements. For instance, the teacher should share with the student the conviction that they are both truly one in Spirit – at the same time cultivating in the student a feeling of dignity and self-respect.⁶ As 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 his ears and understand through his mind. Such a teacher can really teach and none else (*CW*, vol. IV, p. 183).

In a favourable ambience such as this ‘the process of uncovering’ the veil of ignorance works smoothly (*CW*, vol. I, p. 28).

On the student’s side, in order to facilitate the manifestation of his innate strength and knowledge, he should cultivate the spirit of *shraddha* – that is, faith in himself, humility, submission and veneration for the teacher. This is also necessary to create a

favourable environment for learning. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* (an ancient Indian scripture – 1.11.2) gives the instruction: '*Acharyadevo bhava* – Let the teacher be your *deva*' [i.e. a person fit to be worshipped or highly honoured]. The teacher/pupil relationship, based on respect and mutual trust, is the cornerstone of the edifice of Vivekananda's scheme of education. The Upanishads also advocated this. Before starting the lesson, the teacher and the pupils were to pray together so that they would mutually benefit and be strengthened by the teaching/learning process.

Character education and universal values

Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna, used to say that *manush* needs to become *man-bush* – that is, a man needs to become a true man. 'He alone is a man,' he said, 'whose spiritual consciousness has been awakened' (*Gospel*, 851). Following his Master, Vivekananda emphasized that 'the ideal of all education, all training, should be this man-making'. Lamenting over the prevailing system of education, he said:

But, instead of that, we are always trying to polish up the outside. What use in polishing up the outside when there is no inside? The end and aim of all training is to make the man grow (*CW*, vol. II, p. 15).

In order to rectify the defects in the existing system, man's limited view of himself, on which the existing system of education is based, needs to be reconsidered. A human being is not simply a composite of body and mind. He is something more. According to the Vedanta philosophy, a human being has five sheaths, or coverings: the physical sheath, the vital sheath, the mental sheath, the intellectual sheath, and the blissful sheath. Today's education can at best touch the first four sheaths, but not the last one. Secular knowledge, skills and moral values may take care of the first four sheaths, but spiritual knowledge is essential for the fifth. Moreover, it should be noted that the fifth sheath is the reservoir of bliss, knowledge and strength, and all the other sheaths are activated by the fifth.

There is no doubt that today's education neglects training of the mind in all its aspects, but it also neglects the spiritual side of human beings. People's minds are not directed to higher pursuits of life with the result that their hidden potentials are not revealed. Only when wisdom, peace, strength, unselfishness, loving concern for others and other virtues become evident is a person transformed from a sensuous being to a true human being.

A tremendous explosion of knowledge without commensurate wisdom, plus immense power not tempered with discrimination, have made education today a potential source of danger. This is a serious problem looming large on humanity's horizon. As Vivekananda observed:

Intellect has been cultured with the result that hundreds of sciences have been discovered, and their effect has been that the few have made slaves of the many – that is all the good that has been done. Artificial wants have been created; and every poor man, whether he has money or not, desires to have those wants satisfied, and when he cannot, he struggles, and dies in the struggle (*CW*, vol. I, p. 414).

In order to counterbalance this uneven development, Vivekananda strongly recommended the adoption of a 'spiritual and ethical culture', and he looked upon 'religion as the innermost core of education' (*CW*, vol. III, p. 182; vol. V, p. 231). But by 'religion' he did not mean any particular religion. Religion to him meant the true eternal principles that inspire every religion. This is what touches the heart and has the potential to effect desirable changes in one's motivation. It also gives mental strength and broadness of outlook. Discussing the practical implications of morality, Swami Vivekananda once observed: 'What is meant by morality? Making the subject strong by attuning it to the Absolute, so that finite nature ceases to have control over us' (*CW*, vol. II, p. 137).

Thus, in order to be worthwhile and effective, education must be rooted in religion – or, to be precise, in the science of spirituality, and evidently not in dogma.

Character-building was fundamental in Vivekananda's educational scheme, as against career-orientation, which occupies centre-stage in today's education. A person is what his thoughts have made him. Explaining this, the Swami said, 'Each thought is a little hammer blow on the lump of iron which our bodies are, manufacturing out of it what we want it to be' (*CW*, vol. VII, p. 20). That is why one finds that the focus of the Swami's educational thoughts was on assimilation of man-making, character-building ideas.

Everything a person does, every thought, every move, leaves an impression on the mind. Even when it is not outwardly apparent, it is strong enough to work beneath the surface. A person's character is determined by the sum total of these impressions. When a large number of these impressions come together, they form a habit. This then becomes a powerful force, for character is but repeated habits. This is why, through the acquisition and repetition of desirable habits, one's character can be remodeled.

The people one associates with, good or bad, contribute much to the development of one's character. In fact, their impact is greater than that of didactic teaching. That is why Swami Vivekananda said: 'Words, even thoughts, contribute only one-third of the influence in making an impression, the man, two-thirds' (*CW*, vol. II, p. 14). He therefore desired that the teacher's life and personality should be like a blazing fire which could have a positive influence on the pupils in his care. Exposure to exemplary role models, particularly when they are teachers, and also to wholesome curriculum materials that impart culturally-approved values to the young, are critical to character education.

Character-building education might focus on teaching what is right and wrong. But simultaneously, or alternatively, it should teach how to decide what is right and wrong. It has been rightly argued that participation in discussions of morality is more instructive than simply hearing about it. In any case, however, the teachers should be moral exemplars if the classroom and the school are to serve as arenas for the teaching of ethics. The students then have the experience of being part of a group of people who take moral values seriously, and this helps them imbibe moral values spontaneously.

The present education system has overemphasized the cultivation of the intellect at the cost of the general well-being of humanity. To check this dangerous trend, Vivekananda strongly recommended all-round development of human beings. In one

of his lectures he expressed the desire 'that all men were so constituted that in their minds *all* these elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion, and of work were equally present in full! That is the ideal, my ideal of a perfect man' (*CW*, vol. II, p. 388).

And the Swami expected that the education systems would be suitably designed to produce such wholesome human beings. Interestingly, the UNESCO report *Learning to be* published in 1972, while defining the aim of education, echoed this same idea. It reads: 'The physical, the intellectual, emotional and ethical integration of the individual into a complete man is a broad definition of the fundamental aim of education.'⁷

The education system and the poor

So far we have discussed education primarily in the context of the society that already benefits from education. Vivekananda, however, was a genuine friend of the poor and the weak, particularly the helpless masses of India, and he was the first Indian leader who sought a solution to their problems through education. He argued that a nation was advanced to the extent that education and culture reached the masses. Unless there was uniform circulation of national blood all over the body, the nation could not rise. He insisted that it was the duty of the upper classes, who had received their education at the expense of the poor, to come forward and uplift the poor through education and other means. In fact, the Swami's mission was for the poor. He once said, 'there must be equal chance for all – or if greater for some and for some less – the weaker should be given more chance than the strong' (*Letters*, 255).

The trend in recent years has been to shift the responsibility for education from the family, religious institutions, private charities and so forth, to public authorities, particularly the State. Yet, in spite of this shift to the State, education has hardly reached the most underprivileged. As they are often victims of malnutrition, poor hygienic conditions and overcrowded housing, they can hardly take advantage of any half-hearted opportunity that is offered.

Vivekananda felt that alienation of any kind from the masses of society, who are mostly poor – whether it be alienation through learning, through wealth or through force of arms – weakens the leadership of a country. Therefore, for a sustainable regeneration of India, if not for anything else, top priority must be given to educating the masses and restoring to them their lost individuality. They should not only be given education to make them self-reliant, but also ideas, moral training and an understanding of their own historical situation so that they can work out their own salvation. Furthermore, they must be given culture, without which there can be no hope for their long-term progress.

The Swami was particularly worried about the degradation of women in India. He was emphatic that women must be educated, for he believed that it is the women who mould the next generation, and hence, the destiny of the country. In Vivekananda's educational scheme for India, the uplift of women and the masses received the highest priority, and his ideas approximated to Paulo Freire's concept of 'Conscientization'.⁸

Conclusion

There have been many changes in the field of education since Swami Vivekananda passed away one hundred years ago, but not as many changes as in other areas of society. One such noticeable change in education is that it is now engaged in preparing human beings for a new type of society, and it is trying to create a new type of human being for it. Interestingly, Swami Vivekananda had envisioned a society with a new type of human being in whom knowledge, action, work and concentration were harmoniously blended, and he proposed a new type of education for achieving this.

The right to education for everyone, guaranteed by the Constitution of India, was Vivekananda's dream, but it is still a far cry from its goal. His idea of continual, or lifelong, education, however, has been adopted in many countries already. Moreover, because of the adoption of continuous education in these countries, our idea of what constitutes success and failure has altered, raising new hope for the weak, underprivileged section of these societies – the very people who for various reasons cannot complete their education when they are young. Vivekananda's cry for the uplift of the downtrodden masses, particularly of the long-neglected women, has evoked a favourable response from different quarters, but societies tailor education to meet their own needs, thereby often robbing the weak of their freedom to determine their own destiny. Unless radical changes are made in all societies the poor will never be able to raise themselves. This was a major concern of the Swami.

It is remarkable the extent to which there are similarities between Vivekananda's thoughts and actions taking place one century ago and the present concerns of UNESCO.

- His commitment towards universal values and tolerance, his active identification with humanity as a whole.
- The struggle in favour of the poor and destitute, to reduce poverty and to eliminate discrimination against women – reaching the unreached.
- His vision of education, science and culture as the essential instruments of human development.
- That education should be a lifelong process.
- And the need to move away from rote learning.

Himself a visionary and an original thinker, Vivekananda pointed out in his first public lecture in Asia, on 15 January 1897: 'But education has yet to be in the world, and civilisation – civilisation has begun nowhere yet' (*CW*, vol. III, p. 114). This is true. If we consider civilization to be the manifestation of the divine in human beings, as Vivekananda conceived it to be, no society has made much progress so far. This is why we find that mildness, gentleness, forbearance, tolerance, sympathy and so forth – the signs of a healthy civilization – have not taken root in any society on an appreciable scale, although we prematurely boast of a global village. The lack of basic necessities among the underprivileged all over the world is no less striking than the lack of morality among the educated privileged ones. To squarely meet this great challenge, Vivekananda prescribed 'man-making and character-building education'.⁹ For

this reason, if not for anything else, Vivekananda's thoughts on education ought to be seriously re-examined today.

Notes

1. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* 5.25. An ancient Indian scripture.
2. Speech by Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of the Exhibition and Seminar in Commemoration of the Centenary of Swami Vivekananda's Appearance at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893, given at UNESCO Headquarters, 8 October 1993.
3. Vivekananda had inspired Sir Jamshedji Tata to set up this educational scheme when they had travelled together from Yokohama to Chicago on the Swami's first visit to the West.
4. Israel Scheffler, *Of human potential*, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.
5. G.H. Bantock, *T.S. Eliot and education*. London: Faber & Faber, 1970, p. 86.
6. *Srimad Bhagavatam*, 3.29.27.
7. Edgar Faure et al., *Learning to be*, Paris: UNESCO, 1972, p. 156.
8. Paulo Freire (1921–1997) of Brazil, one of the best known educators of our time, developed a teaching system based on an educational process that focuses on the learner's environment. According to Freire, the learner must be aware of the historical situation in which he is situated, and he must understand how the knowledge he acquires relates to himself and to the society he lives in. Freire lay emphasis on building critical awareness to enable a person to read and write not words, but true reality – i.e. to understand true reality. Critical awareness building does not stop at reflection but includes action on that reflection. Vivekananda also believed that a person is the maker of his own destiny and proper education can help him achieve this.
9. In this connection we can cite the views of some historians. Will and Ariel Durant, in their *The lessons of history*, said, 'Evolution in men during recorded time has been social rather than biological: it has proceeded not by heritable variations in the species, but mostly by economic, political, intellectual and moral innovation transmitted to individuals and generations by imitation, custom or education' (Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *The lessons of history*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968, p. 34).

References

- Quotations bearing the reference *CW* in the text are taken from: *The complete works of Swami Vivekananda*. Volumes I–IX. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989. (Mayavati Memorial Edition.)
- Quotations bearing the reference *Letters* are taken from *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*. 4th ed. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1976.
- Quotations from Sri Ramakrishna bearing the reference *Gospel* are taken from: *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1981.
- Other references are as follows:
- Datta, B. 1993. *Swami Vivekananda, patriot-prophet – a study*. Calcutta: Nababharat Publ.
- Gambhirananda, Swami. 1996. *Yuganayak Vivekananda* [Vivekananda, the leader of this era]. 3 vols. Calcutta: Udbodhan Karyalaya.

Rolland, R. 1992. *The life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, trans. from French by E.F. Malcolm-Smith. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.

Works about Swami Vivekananda

- Ahluwalia, B. 1983. *Vivekananda and the Indian Renaissance*. New Delhi: Associated Publishing Co.
- Avinashalingam, T.S. 1974. *Educational philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*. 3rd ed. Coimbatore: Sri Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya.
- Burke, M.L. 1984. *Swami Vivekananda in the West: new discoveries*, 6 vols. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.
- Dhar, S. 1975. *A comprehensive biography of Swami Vivekananda*. 2 vols. Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra.
- Gnatuk-Danil'chuk, A.P. 1986. *Tolstoy and Vivekananda*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.
- His Eastern and Western Admirers. 1983. *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*. 3rd ed. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.
- His Eastern and Western Disciples. 1989. *The life of Swami Vivekananda*. 2 vols. 6th ed. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.
- Hossain, M. 1980. *Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of education*. Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan.
- Nivedita, Sister. 1999. *The Master as I saw him*. 9th ed., 12th printing. Calcutta: Udbodhan Office.
- Raychaudhuri, T. 1988. *Europe reconsidered: perceptions of the West in nineteenth century Bengal*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sengupta, S.C. 1984. *Swami Vivekananda and Indian nationalism*. Calcutta: Shishu Sahitya Samsad.
- Singh, S.K. 1983. *Religious and moral philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*. Patna: Janaki Prakashan.
- Toyne, M. 1983. *Involved in mankind: the life and message of Vivekananda*. Bourne End, United Kingdom: Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre.
- Williams, G. 1974. *The quest for meaning of Swami Vivekananda: a study of religious change*. California: New Horizons Press.

Works by Swami Vivekananda

- Education*. 1998. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- Inspired Talks*. 1998. 22nd impression. Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- Lectures from Colombo to Almora*. 1999. 18th impression. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.
- Modern India*. 1994. 11th impression. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.
- Practical Vedanta*. 1997. 16th impression. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.
- Teachings of Swami Vivekananda*. 1997. 13th impression. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.

Works edited and translated by Swami Vivekananda

- Sangeet Kalpataru* [Wish-fulfilling tree of music], ed. by Narendranath Datta & Vaishnavcharan Basak. 1294 [Bengali Year]. Calcutta. [Reprinted by The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta, 2000.]
- Shiksha* [Education], Translation by Swami Vivekananda into Bengali of *Education: intellectual, moral, and physical* by Herbert Spencer. [First published by Basumati Sahitya Mandir, Calcutta. Reprinted by Udbodhan Karyalaya, Calcutta, 1999].

