

The Art of Man Making & Character Building: Inspirations from Swami Vivekananda¹

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One of the important themes of Swami Vivekananda is the issue of building a strong character among the youth. He advocated for an educational system that is truly man making. Such an education, according to him, will mean manifestation of perfection already in man. What is not adequately understood is where this man-making process indeed leads an individual to? Also it is not clear as to how this individual will benefit from such a process. A closer scrutiny of the personality and teachings of Swami Vivekananda will give us enough understanding of these aspects. Indeed the goal of man making education is to build inner strength and a strong character that guides an individual to make a meaningful and a contented life. In a letter written to his Madras disciples on November 19, 1894, Swami Vivekananda explained that neither money, nor name nor fame nor learning that pays, but only love. Further he wrote, “... it is character that cleaves its way through adamant walls of difficulties”...³.

What does it mean to develop character?

It is most appropriate to quote from a letter that Swami Vivekananda wrote on August 20, 1893 to Alasinga Perumal, which outlines concisely the hallmarks of an individual developing inner strength and character⁴. ... *“A hundred thousand men and women fired with the zeal of holiness, fortified with eternal faith in the Lord, and nerved to lion’s courage by their sympathy for the poor and the fallen and the downtrodden, will go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of help, the gospel of social raising up - the gospel of equality”* ... There are some important key words in this statement worth noting and elaborating further. A cursory look at the statement might make one a little confused. In today’s context people, more often than not, find that lion’s courage and sympathy are in the opposite camps. Courage is seen as strength to bulldoze anything that comes one’s way whereas values such as sympathy and passion are seen as choices of people who are perceived to be weak, marginalized and less popular. A critical analysis of these contradictions and a good understanding of these pairs of opposites will go a long way in appreciating the power of character building in individuals.

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³ Letters of Swami Vivekananda, (2006), Advaita Ashrama, pp 173 - 175.

⁴ Letters of Swami Vivekananda, (2006), Advaita Ashrama, pp 38 - 45.

Strength and Gentleness

The first and the foremost issue that one can see in a person of true character is that *strength* and *gentleness* will coexist. In today's context the common parlance understanding of these two terms is too superficial. We tend to see these two attributes in opposite camps. A gentle person, many feel, is feeble, leaves unfair things unchallenged and generally lives on the margin. On the other hand, the term strength carries multiple tags. It gives an impression that people with muscle power, money and political power and the support of goondas are strong. These are objects, issues and entities pertaining to the "world outside". Unfortunately, the notion of strength and gentleness do not refer to any of these. They are matters pertaining to the "world within". As Swami Vivekananda proclaimed, such a person will have the heart of a lion from which he/she will derive infinite strength.

If strength leads to oppression, restriction and subordination of others, it merely points to improper and inadequate development of character. On the other hand, a fully developed character will also forebear a great deal of gentleness. The notion of gentleness arises from the vision of oneness with which one can see various aspects of this divine creation. Individuals and opinions are accepted and accommodated even when there is a degree of disagreement with situations and opinions. In such an overall positive frame of mind efforts will be made to transform and modify unacceptable aspects.

Broadmindedness and Faith

The second aspect of character building is that *great broadmindedness* will develop along with *intensity of faith and conviction*. Swami Vivekananda is an embodiment of this twin values of faith and broadmindedness. To quote his own words, ...*"to preach the doctrine of Shraddha or genuine faith is the mission of my life... I am ready to prove here that throughout the whole of India, there runs a mutual and cordial string of eternal faith in the perfection of humanity, and I believe in it myself. And let that faith be spread over the whole world ..."*⁵.

Similar to the earlier assertion, today's understanding of these two views is contradictory. If any person claims to have faith, there is a tendency to look down upon him as being very narrow minded. By the same logic, great broadmindedness can develop only at the expense of faith and conviction. Believing is generally considered to be in the domain of faith and conviction. Therefore, if we take this idea of broadmindedness to its next step, then the more broadminded we are, the less we need to "believe". This notion of not believing in certain things over time extends from ideas and customs to people. Once we reach this level, we tend to trust people less and become more suspicious of them and their actions and notions. If we continue in this journey of non-belief, soon we will develop self-centred views and opinions on many things around us, challenge people, customs and beliefs and

⁵ (2007), "Swami Vivekananda on himself", Advaita Ashrama pp. 279.

demand “my way or the high way” approach to things in life. We are seeing snippets of these today in the name of broadmindedness. How can these ever contribute to building superior character in an individual? It is impossible to build character by looking down upon others, discounting them by power, politics or intellectual prowess.

On the other hand, broadmindedness must lead to a great deal of acceptance and accommodation of alternative viewpoints and people. Once we take this perspective all the negative aspects of faith will melt away. However, in order for the character to fully develop we need to also develop deep convictions and faith in certain aspects. For instance, leading a *dharmic* way of life, believing in an overall super-power and transcendence are very conducive for developing character. Faith is a fundamental strength we all possess. It emboldens an individual and encourages him/her to pursue things considered to be good. It also provides moral support from “within” during difficult times and is a lone companion during one’s journey through the difficult terrain of his/her life. Indeed most of the character making of such a person lies in this frame of mind that she/he develops while engaging in this life journey.

The most important raw material a Nobel Laureate brings to the table in his/her laboratory is a deep faith that something is there to unfold. Without this faith and deep conviction it is impossible for the scientist to toil in his/her laboratory for years and overcome one experimental challenge over the other. Even ordinary individuals constantly fall back on faith as they face many things in their own life. Assume that you visit a village and are attracted by the charm of a large fresh water lake. As you prepare to get into the lake to take bath a local villager comes and warns you not to venture into the lake as there are deadly crocodiles in the lake. The only wise thing for us to do is to have faith in the person, trust what he says and abandon the idea. This behavior comes very natural to us because to trust is our strength. The trust is not on the words but on the person. We make a value judgment on the person and blindly listen to him. For a similar reason we blindly accept a doctor’s prescription or a course of treatment he prescribes for an ailment, an advice by a real estate consultant or a lawyer. Therefore, it is important to realize the value of faith and convictions and its important role in character building.

Fearlessness and Compassion

Fear is one of the basic problems that every one of us needs to address. For some the list is indeed very long and it even starts from losing a small piece of possession (such as a Rs. 50 currency or a pen etc.) to losing positions, fame, friendships, powerful connections, relationships etc. However, we also see that some people are able to outgrow almost all items in the above list and literally travel in the highway of fearlessness. Also, strangely they seem to develop a great deal of compassion in the process. There are a number of social and spiritual leaders who belong to this list.

Consider for example the life of Baba Amte. Amte was born as the eldest son of a wealthy landowner, and became a lawyer in 1936. Even as a married man, as he was looking into the affairs of his family's 450-acre farm he renounced his property and gave up his legal practice, and in doing so, forfeited all claims to family support. One day Amte was servicing latrines in the posh localities of Baroda (now Vadodara) and was carrying a basket of night-soil on his head to the tanker. On the way he came across a leprosy affected person in the gutter. It changed his way of life. In 1951 he founded the Warora Maharogi Seva Samiti to enable leprosy patients help themselves, which later became Anandwan, a self-reliant cooperative community carved out by crippled social outcasts⁶. Similarly, consider the case of Narayanan Krishnan, a 19 year old boy choosing to give up a budding international career and the job itself to think elaborately about the problem of the destitutes in the city of Madurai in South India just because he saw the pitiable state of a destitute on his way to the Meenakshi temple in Madurai⁷. These examples are cases in point to demonstrate what happens when an individual builds character the way Swami Vivekananda proclaimed.

The moot question is how much courage (fearlessness) would we have to act in the manner these two have done should we encounter a similar situation. The answer to this question lies in the level of character building that we have in us. Some of us would have been "temporarily" moved by this heart melting story but would have returned to our normal chores a little later. Others would have not slept for a day, still others would have felt very uncomfortable for an extended period of time (say a week or so) before we return to normalcy. A few of us would have taken a serious resolve to support this cause at least by sending some money.

Great character formation eventually leads an individual to a state of fearlessness and compassion. During the conversation between Sage Yajnavalkya and King Janaka, the sage concludes, "Janaka, you have become truly fearless" (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.2.4: अभयं वै जनको प्राप्तोऽसीति होवाच याज्ञवल्क्यः)⁸. One does not develop fearlessness out of having an army of body guards or Z category security provided by the Government of India. Nor is it measured by the number of gun licenses one has or the level of protection that one has around his/her place of dwelling. In fact many of these are required when the inner-self is very weak. On the contrary, development of the inner-self leads to building a strong character that makes individuals fearless. Fearlessness releases a lot of latent energy in an individual which can be channelized for more productive purposes. At the same time, they become more compassionate, which provides them a new dimension to channelize the

⁶ See for example, Mehrotra, R. (2010). "Work Builds, Charity Destroys", Chapter 8 in Ennoble, English course book, Second Year Pre-University, The Karnataka Text Book Society, pp. 63 – 70.

⁷ See for more details, <http://www.akshayatrust.org/>, last accessed on December 24, 2012.

⁸ Swami Madhavananda, (1997), "The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad", Advaita Ashrama, pp. 413 – 414. See also Swami Krishnananda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Divine Life Society, Sivananda Ashram Rishikesh, India, pp. 370 – 372. http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/brdup/Brihadaranyaka_Upanishad.pdf, last accessed on December 24, 2012.

released energy. This dual state of fearlessness and compassion is described in chapter 12 of Bhagavad Gita as “यस्मात् न उद्विजेत लोकाः लोकात् न उद्विजेत च यः”⁹. Therefore, such an individual neither fears about the world nor is fearful for the world.

Benefits of developing a strong inner-self and character

Life is indeed a roller coaster ride and it is very common that we face ups and downs as we come into contact with various situations. There are times when we succeed in our attempts and in certain other occasions we do not. Some days end up miserably and some other days turn out to be happy. Shri Krishna brings this idea beautifully in chapter 2 of Bhagavad Gita (Gita 2.14: मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः). The biggest challenge we face is in our inability to handle these periodic swings.

The greatest advantage of developing a strong character is the ability of such a person to withstand the non-sense in life. A person with a strong character does not get rattled by the upswings and downswings of life. He/she develops a greater sense of equanimity and get engaged in his/her chosen field of activities undistracted. This forms the core foundation for the prosperity of the people in a society. What a person with great character, strong inner-self, clarity of thought and purpose can do is best summarized in the words of Swami Vivekananda himself. ...”I have experienced even in my insignificant life that good motives, sincerity and infinite love can conquer the world. One single soul possessed of these virtues can destroy the dark designs of millions of hypocrites and brutes ...”¹⁰

⁹ Swami Ranganathananda, (2003), “Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gita”, Volume 3, Advaita Ashrama, pp. 23 – 24.

¹⁰ (1989). “The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda”, Volume 5, Advaita Ashrama (Mayavati Memorial Edition), pp 127.