

Study Circles of the Mahamandal

Wherever there is a unit of the Mahamandal, there is at least one weekly study circle. Though we call it *study circle*, its purpose is not just study. It is also a meeting point for all local youths who may be interested in the ideas of the Mahamandal. When they come together, they feel they are not alone in this work, they feel a bond of friendship with others. They get recharged with the spirit of Vivekananda.

The Mahamandal is not for people who have renounced the world. It is for ordinary young men, who live in society like other lay people. But there is a difference – they work hard to understand the meaning of life and the needs of our society and mould their life in the light of that understanding. They study in schools and colleges and then enter into some profession in order to make a living. Yet they are not too ordinary. They have opted for a rather difficult way of life. They have an ideal to follow ‘in every movement of life’. Naturally, they have to struggle against the flow. So, they must begin their journey with clear concepts. They should also gradually capture the vision of the youth movement on a nation-wide scale, which Swamiji planned to rebuild India and which the Mahamandal wants to accomplish. The study circle helps them to develop these concepts through study and meaningful discussions.

It may not be easy for young people to choose what to study. So the Mahamandal suggests a selected set of small books for the study circles. These will be enough for our purpose. Personally we should all read these books between the lines, again and again, and ponder over the themes. Thus ideas become our own, and we can then work with them. These books bring to us the noblest ideas in the simplest form – coming from no less a person than Vivekananda. We have three steps to assimilate great and good ideas: study seriously, think deeply and freely, and then apply – put them into practice. Mere reading can make you a *pundit*, but it will not transform your life, nor give you a complete conception. If we all proceed in this line, especially those of us who conduct the study circles, in our everyday life, then only the study circle can be run with the *right spirit* in a *lively manner*, and then only many newcomers will be attracted, develop right understanding, and come forward to join the work.

Discussions must be so clear that every young man can grasp them. The ideas offered should not be too high, too removed from their world. The youths coming to the study circle should be able to relate these new ideas with their *experience* in life. Experience is the great teacher. As they apply the newly learnt ideas, they would get new experiences. That would convince them of the correctness of these ideas. We should never forget that our focus is on our practical life – how to build our life, without giving up our family and normal avocations. That is what society needs, because that is what makes men of us.

We should encourage all to study at home and to actively participate in the discussions. We must never pooh-pooh anybody's ideas, but try to improve them gradually, patiently, with a very friendly and positive attitude. Never forget that you are not a teacher, but as much a student as any other participant. There is no 'leader of the house' here. And while a plan should be followed sincerely at study circles, we may not make it a mechanical affair with an overdose of imposed discipline. Let the youths be youthful, let them come with an open heart to Vivekananda, and let them have the touch of selfless love.

Those who conduct the sessions need to study the Mahamandal literature thoroughly – not only to understand the ideas and the methods of this organization, but also to follow the Mahamandal's unique approach to reach the young minds. We must talk to them in a language they can understand. Stuffing the youths too much with words like 'religion', 'spirituality', 'yoga', 'bhakti', 'Avaiva Vedanta', and so on will not serve the purpose. There are a large number of youths who may not be interested in these, as these words are more often misunderstood in society. These are not their immediate need either. Swamiji wrote in a letter to some youngsters, 'Be moral, be brave – keep your heart completely pure. Be strictly moral, brave unto desperation. Do not bother your heads with religious theories.' We should catch the spirit.

So, let the young men of today develop right concepts gradually. Do not scare the newcomers away with your own idiosyncrasies. Try to understand their need, capacity, and taste. Let them first understand how they can develop their body, mind, and heart. Let them become men of strictly moral character – principled and confident. Let them understand the terrible condition of our poor people and the need for work, for sacrifice. That will make a band a youths, under the leadership of Swami Vivekananda, who will bring about a root and branch change in India, which is yet to come as prophesied by Swami Vivekananda.