

Vedanta for The Masses

As in every other area of knowledge, education and religion have theories galore, producing a mire of confusion in the minds of people. But if you boil them down, a few fundamental principles remain. And these we find in clear and simple words from Vivekananda. At the core of all his ideas lies the profound proclamation of the Vedanta, that all power is latent in every being, waiting to be awakened at the human stage of evolution. So, Vivekananda proceeded to give a pithy definition of education: 'Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.' Perfection is the loftiest thing we may crave for. It is fullness, absence of any limit – fullness of power and knowledge, of love and purity.

From the angle of religion, this may be called *divinity*. Religions have their philosophies, mythologies, and rituals, but at their core lies the same essence, the One Religion, which, according to Swamiji, is 'the manifestation of the Divinity already in man'. Thus the essence of religion and that of education do not differ. And how can they? Both are meant, in the final analysis, to serve the very purpose of life itself.

Turning to Vivekananda once again to listen about life, we find he described it in the same vein: 'Life is the unfoldment and development of a being under circumstances tending to press it down.' The *being* is folded inside, as it were, trying to come out, to express itself, revolting against the forces of nature that are not conducive to its manifestation.

On another occasion he said, 'A spring of infinite power is coiled up and is inside this little body, and that spring is spreading itself.... *This is the history of man, of religion, civilisation, or progress.* That giant Prometheus, who is bound, is getting himself unbound.' Thus from him we get but a single essential idea, simple and straight, ready to be applied in every sphere of thought, encompassing the whole gamut of existence, that can be implemented right away in every details of life.

This is the gist of what he wanted humanity to know – for the practical purpose of consciously doing what they must do any way: this struggle to bring out their inherent glory. He clarified: 'I do not mean to preach *Advaitism*, or *Dvaitism*, or any *ism* in the world. The only *ism* that we require now is this wonderful idea of the soul – its eternal might, its eternal strength, its eternal purity, and its eternal perfection. If I had a child I would from its very birth begin to tell it, "Thou art the Pure One." You have read in one of the *Puranas* that beautiful story of queen Madalasa, how as soon as she has a child she puts her baby with her own hands in the cradle, and how, as the cradle rocks to and fro, she begins to sing, "Thou art the Pure One, the Stainless, the Sinless, the Mighty One, the Great One." Ay, there is much in that. Feel that you are great and you become great.'

For raising the common man, he was sure, this idea would work like a miracle. Only it has to be brought down to the practical everyday life of the masses from the eerie heights of forest-dwelling meditators. In a long letter to Sarala Ghoshal, the famous niece of Rabindranath Tagore, he analysed the problems of the downtrodden masses and concluded, 'The remedy now is the spread of education. First of all, *ātma-vidyā* (Self-knowledge). I do not mean thereby *jatā* (matted hair), *danda* (staff), *Kamandalu* (metal jug), and mountain caves, which the word suggests. What do I mean then? Cannot the knowledge, by which is attained even freedom from the bondage of worldly existence, bring ordinary material prosperity? Certainly it can. Freedom, dispassion, renunciation – all these are the very highest ideals, but – "Even a little of this *Dharma* saves one from the great fear."... That power manifests as soon as it gets the opportunity and the right place and time. From the highest god to the meanest grass, the same power is present in all – whether manifested or not. *We shall*

have to call forth that power by going from door to door.’ Along with that should come secular education.

He went on to explain the practical level of application he meant: ‘In New York I used to observe the Irish colonists come – downtrodden, haggard-looking, destitute of all possessions at home, penniless, and wooden-headed – with their only belongings, a stick and a bundle of rags hanging at the end of it, fright in their steps, alarm in their eyes. A different spectacle in six months – the man walks upright, his attire is changed! In his eyes and steps there is no more any sign of fright. What is the cause? Our Vedanta says that that Irishman was kept surrounded by contempt in his own country – the whole of nature was telling him with one voice, “Pat, you have no more hope, you are born a slave and will remain so.” Having been thus told from his birth, Pat believed in it and hypnotised himself that he was very low, and the Brahman in him shrank away. While no sooner had he landed in America than he heard the shout going up on all sides, “Pat, you are a man as we are. It is man who has done all, a man like you and me can do everything: have courage!” Pat raised his head and saw that it was so, the Brahman within woke up. Nature herself spoke, as it were, “Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached” ’

The glory of man is also the greatest uniting force, as ‘the same power is present in all’. That signifies our essential oneness that is expressed in the form of unselfishness and breaks down all barriers of hate and dissention. And to take this idea for assimilation and putting into practice is *practical Vedanta*.