

Managing Stress and Promoting Human Well-being: Insights from Swami Vivekanand's Philosophy of Education

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Abstract

Education is considered to be the foundation of a developed nation. It is the stepping stone towards a comprehensive development of individuals and society. However, the present-day educational system, to a certain extent, is bounded by a fixed infrastructure where knowledge is theoretically imparted without allowing the students to experience it. The teaching-learning process is confined in watertight compartments of a prescribed syllabus following a fixed format. It lacks the character-building process of an individual, which otherwise helps human beings deal with the everyday problems of life with moral perseverance. In this challenging and changing global environment, where mental issues like stress have become a common problem amongst individuals, Swāmi Vivekānanda's philosophy of education appears to be a pertinent solution for maintaining a balanced state of mind and fruitful growth of an individual. Swāmiji's model of education laid much stress on moral and value education. According to Swāmiji, for the integrated development of an individual, it is vital to train their mind through concentration and meditation. Concentration of mind is the best method for educating the students to self-experience the knowledge gained regarding their subject. A well-trained mind can deal with life's intricate issues, whether physical, mental or social. It helps to experience practical knowledge of various matters and subjects. Thus, individuals (especially the students) need to inculcate moral values centred on the philosophy of Vedānta and Upaniṣads. Vedānta is the bedrock of Swāmi Vivekānanda's entire philosophy. Vedānta teaches the oneness of reality. This higher knowledge gives an individual tremendous strength and confidence to deal with the concerns of life. It enhances an individual's mental and physical health and helps them to strive for the higher things in life, such as realising inner strength. The primary aim of this paper is to explore the significance of Swāmi Vivekānanda's model of education in managing stress and promoting well-being. It aims to explicate how Vivekānanda's concept of man-making education can help maintain progressive mental health in the contemporary world.

Keywords: *Education, Swāmi Vivekānanda, Stress management, Mental Health, Human Well-being*

Introduction

Education is considered to be the greatest nation-building movement. It plays a significant role in an individual's and society's comprehensive development. However, the present education system poses several challenges to the nation's progress. The modern education system functions in a fixed set-up where information is poured into students' minds and they are trained and instructed to cram it to score well in their academic ventures. Such education makes man a machine where s/he fails to exercise their free will and intellect. The focus remains on intellectual education alone, impeding an individual from growing substantially.

Consequently, one fails to deal with one's daily life problems effectively.

Additionally, it is giving rise to various mental issues such as stress, depression, anxiety, and anger. Dr. Kiran Walia mentions the perspective of Vivekānanda on this particular matter: "The present education system has overemphasised the cultivation of the intellect at the cost of the general well-being of humanity." (Vivekananda, 2008, p. 28) It neglects the comprehensive development of human beings. Modern education fails to instil moral values in an individual. The focus remains on career building. It does not equip one to deal with stress and fails to prepare them for life's challenges. Young

students are seen gripped by serious mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

It is vital to note here that the present education system reflects the Western influence of thought. To a large extent, the Western education system only focused on training the mind to accomplish material prosperity. It depicts a machine-making model of education that helps an individual to earn a decent livelihood. However, it fails to empower him/her to achieve the higher objectives of life. It poses a serious challenge to the moral development of humanity. Amidst this situation, Swāmi Vivekānanda's philosophy of education appears to be a pertinent approach to facing the challenges of modern education. His thoughts on education were influenced by the ancient Indian education system that stressed the training of the mind and heart for accomplishing spiritual goals along with worldly progress. The indigenous education system in India that degenerated in the colonial era was revived by the contemporary philosopher Swāmi Vivekānanda, who aimed to develop a comprehensive education model.

Makarand Paranjape, while explicating Vivekānanda's contribution to India's development, points out that "He was able to rouse a defeated nation's consciousness by restoring pride and dignity to its masses." (Paranjape, 2020, p. 205) Education was a key instrument in bringing about the new transformation. It is interesting to know that Swāmi Vivekānanda did not write any particular discourse on his educational philosophy. His views on education can be inferred from his vivid lectures on this subject. His valuable thoughts on education are relevant in contemporary times.

Vivekānanda's Philosophy of Education

Swāmi Vivekānanda's philosophy of education depicted the essential nature, aims, and means of education. Vivekānanda envisioned a unique model of education that represented a perfect blend of spirituality and modern science. According to him, education must include science and technological advances. At the same time, it must be rooted in the teachings of the Vedānta that advocate the oneness of reality.

Education should help realise the potential divinity of the human soul. He believed that "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man." (Vivekananda, 1989, Vol. IV, p. 358) It aimed at producing perfect men whose minds possess all the elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion, and hard work equally. Swami Muktidananda, while explaining Vivekānanda's views on the nature of education, says, "For Swamiji, education is a profound and meaningful term and a method of training and transforming the whole human personality, consequently bringing about social transformation." (Muktidananda, 2004, p. 19)

The main scheme of Vivekānanda's philosophy of education was the character-building of human beings. Swāmiji emphasised that every educational system must cultivate strength, confidence, and capacity in individuals so that they can strive for the higher things in life. Swāmiji believed that "Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and ruins riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas." (Vivekananda, 1989, Vol. III, p. 302) An individual's character comprises the tendencies of his/her mind. Each experience of our life, whether pleasurable or painful, leaves an impression in our minds. T. S. Avinashilingam, in this context, explains that "Swami Vivekananda compared the human mind to a ball which is constantly being hit. All the hits leave their marks on the ball. All the experiences involving our interaction in society shape our minds." (Avinashilingam, 1997, p. 76)

Even though an experience shapes our minds and influences our actions, an individual has the freedom to accept or reject any influence. One can exercise one's choices that conclusively shape one's destiny. This freedom is attained through man-making education. Concentration of mind helps an individual to shape their destiny. A holistic education brings clarity of mind and gives the right direction to one's will. Thus, the role of education is to mould one's character and inspire one to strive to achieve nobler qualities of life along with earning a livelihood.

For Vivekānanda, education was not limited to book learning or attaining diversified knowledge. Instead, he believed that “The training by which the current and expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful is called education” (Vivekānanda, 1989, Vol. IV, p. 490). People should be allowed to practice and experience moral values to build a good character. One who starts thinking and practising good work, the impressions left on the mind remain noble. The inclination towards noble acts builds a stronger character. Theoretical education is of no use until it is practised and experienced practically. Moral values should be incorporated into the education system. People must be motivated to practice the knowledge gained diligently.

The significance of the practical aspect of education can be depicted from the life of Swāmiji’s master, Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahāmsa. Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa came from a pastoral background. Unlike Swāmi Vivekānanda, he did not undergo any formal academic training. However, his zeal for spiritual enlightenment drove him to learn the system of various religious traditions. By experiencing the claims of diverse spiritual customs and practices taught by various teachers, he realized that every tradition, if practiced faithfully, leads to the knowledge of the higher reality. The path to the supreme reality may vary, but they all lead to the same realization. Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa realized the truth of life through self-experience, representing the practical learning method as insisted in our ancient education system.

For Vivekānanda, the most important method of education is concentration of mind. One needs to train one’s mind to concentrate to experience the higher truth of life. T.S. Avinashilingam explains the two types of concentration demonstrated in the lives of great people worldwide. “One is concentration of mind on a certain problem or a certain subject..... Great scientists and philosophers of the world come under this category....The second form of concentration is the concentration that characterises prophets of all ages in their lives to deliver their message to the world.” (Avinashilingam, 1997, pp. 61-62)

Great thinkers like Śaṅkarācārya and Sri Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahāmsa come under the latter category.

Cultivating the mind to concentrate is the best method of true education. It helps an individual to grow spiritually and intellectually. Most importantly, it enables one to think open-mindedly and encourages achieving the highest end of life, which is the knowledge of the inner divinity of self. Vivekānanda believed that “The end and aim of all training is to make the man grow” (Vivekananda, 1989, Vol. II, p. 15) His testimony of faith that “Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal.” (Vivekananda, 1989, Vol. I, p.124) elucidates that education sharpens the potentiality already within us. There is nothing that exists outside. One realises the inner self through concentration of mind, which is the primary aim of man-making education. Education is not merely collecting and memorising facts but training the mind to concentrate on the subject at every stage of learning. For Vivekānanda, “The ideal of all education, all training, should be this man-making.” (Vivekananda, 1989, Vol. II, p. 15) In other words, the primary aim of education is to train the mind to be ‘mindful’ so that it can think independently, which, unfortunately, is overlooked in the present education system.

Such an education model helps attain true knowledge and promotes human well-being. The vital question in this context is how Vivekānanda’s vision of education helps in stress management and promotes human well-being. Let us first understand what creates stress and mental anxiety.

Managing Mental Health through Man-making Education

We all face intricate, stressful, and sometimes chaotic situations in our everyday lives. According to Vivekānanda’s analysis of human predicaments, stress is part of an individual’s condition. We face diverse issues that are either favourable or unfavourable. While favourable situations make us happy, unfavourable situations generate pain. One needs to

understand that stress is inevitable in human being's lives. But what causes stress and mental health issues? There are two aspects to this issue.

The psychological aspect would reveal that stress depends on one's adaption to the gravity of experience. The level of stress depends on the way one handles the situation. Scholars like Good and Beitman point out that "Stress is an unavoidable aspect of being alive. Hence, how people respond to stress determines, to a large extent, the impact of stress in their lives." (Good and Beitman, 2006, p. 229) It means the real problem exists in our response to the stressful situation. A wholesome response would help in stress management efficiently. In contrast, an unwholesome response leads to various mental health issues such as poor concentration, weak self-confidence, anger, sadness, distress, decline in productivity, and pessimistic behaviour.

On the other side, the philosophical aspect would reveal that one of the vital reasons for stress is attachment to the outcomes of one's actions and behaviour. When an action is performed with a constant focus on the results, it invariably develops a fear of failure in our minds. Our mind gets overpowered by stress, impatience, anxiety, anger, tension, and fear. It affects the mental health of a person, reduces the power of self-awareness, and encumbers access to the inner self. The role of holistic education is to enable an individual to manage stress efficiently. It encourages an individual to face issues and triumphs over them. Education helps one to realise the inner divinity that one possesses. It helps to cultivate strength and confidence to recognise the higher reality of life. This strength empowers us to combat the adversities of life. Unfortunately, the present education system overlooks such noble objectives. Consequently, a lack of value education hinders the growth of an individual as it does not allow one to *think* open-mindedly. Students are taught not to gain and experience knowledge but to score good marks.

Vivekānanda's man-making model of education empowers an individual to fight anxiety,

depression, fear, and stress and promotes human well-being. Through concentration (as the method of education), one develops the strength to give a wholesome response to adverse situations that otherwise produce stress. Vivekānanda envisioned a system of education that synthesises Vedānta and modern science. Knowledge of the self and the phenomenal world must complement each other for a progressive society. The knowledge of Vedānta's teachings helps to rise above material knowledge and enlightens one to know the higher truth of life, i.e., the inner self. A holistic education helps to analyse and reflect on the situation and enables one to deal with it practically. Swāmiji 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." (Vivekananda, 1989, Vol. VII, pp. 147-148)

Conclusion

The paper explored how Swāmi Vivekānanda's educational philosophy can help manage stress and promote well-being. It explored how to ensure the holistic growth of human beings amidst the educational challenges one faces in the global environment. From the above discussion, it can be inferred that Vivekānanda's philosophy of education enables an individual to develop self-awareness and makes one confident and self-reliant in dealing with various life-issues. It empowers one to realise the higher truths of human life. The man-making model of education focuses on human beings' physical, psychological, and social development. Vivekānanda's educational philosophy, being a perfect blend of Vedāntic ideas and modern science, motivates one to be moral, innovative, curious, and fearless in their thoughts, words, and deeds. It allows individuals to work for self-development and the masses, thus promoting universal brotherhood.

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