

Youth and Ambitions

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(Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the woodcutter exhorts us to go forward. Just as the woodcutter following the Sadhu's instruction went forward and discovered a sandalwood forest, a silver mine, a gold mine, diamonds and precious gems, the youth also must go forward and realize infinite potentialities. Swami Harshananda, Head of Ramakrishna Math, Allahabad, analyses the aspirations of the youth and gives practical hints for achieving them.)

THE biographies of an overwhelming majority of us can be penned in just three sentences: "He was born. He lived. And then, he died!" But Swami Vivekananda, the *man* among men, does not want our lives to fit into this despicable pattern. Says he in his wellknown essay *The East and the West*: "When you are born a man, leave some indelible mark behind you!" To aspire to leave one's footprints on the sands of time is a very legitimate ambition for the youth. We may even go the extent of stating that it is imperative! The Vedas advocate that human beings should cherish the desire to live the full span of life, of one hundred years, and live it vigorously and happily. One of the Upanishads, the Isavasya, even recommends that this full span of life must be spent in socially useful activity.

So, if our youth entertain desires and ambitions, it is but a natural phenomenon. On the other hand, if they do not, there is something wrong with them!

But then, there are ambitions and ambitions. There are small ambitions, and there are the big ones. Both have their place in life, even as a tiny bolt and a big shaft have their place in a huge machine.

Let us see what ambitions an average youth normally nurses in his life, even if they be only 'average' ones. One's own body being the most tangible part of one's personality, and an important means of fulfilling one's ambitions, naturally gets the pride of place. He—and 'he' includes 'she' also—wants, therefore, good health, strength, energy and stamina. And, of course, he wants to appear handsome, as handsome as God-given features and man-made aids to beauty can permit. And, to be sure,

he wants a good education, an education that helps him not only to earn a comfortable livelihood, but also live a decent life in the society. And above all, he does want to achieve something worthwhile in life, especially in his field of work.

Merely cherishing desires for entertaining ambitions is not enough. One has to discover the right means of fulfilling them and work vigorously to achieve them. First comes health and strength. No doubt, nutritious food, good drinking water, pure air, physical exercise, good sleep, rest and relaxation will help achieve it. But no less important is freedom from worries and tensions, since the mind and the body are closely interlinked. As is the mind, so will the body be.

Physical beauty is the second aspect of the youth's ambitions. Youth are particularly self-conscious about their physical appearance. They want to look smart, handsome and attractive. And, the entire cosmetics market is at their 'service', ever ready to 'help' them, if only they have enough money to spend. More often than not, they do spend it, perhaps, even at the cost of things that would have given them better health! However, they should note one thing, that a peaceful face with a pleasant smile is their best cosmetic. Face being the index of the mind can never be peaceful or pleasant unless the mind is at peace or is joyous. So we see that, even for achieving physical beauty, it is necessary to keep the mind at peace and rest.

Then comes the third aspect: a good education. Though the tendency towards a breadwinning education or getting a paper-degree as a means to it has made deep inroads into the field of education, yet the youth can and do respond

well, when they are given the right direction. Any education worth the name should not only give them competence in any profession they choose to adopt, but also equip them with wisdom, efficiency, culture and a degree of refinement based on a sound value-system. It is these that can ultimately stand them in good stead.

As is obvious, mind-culture is of supreme importance in education. It is imperative that education should help the youth discover the means and methods of improving their power of concentration, memory and will. This is possible only when the youth really thirst for knowledge as is signified by the word *vidyārthin* ('one who is hankering for knowledge').

It will not be out of place if a few hints are given here for developing concentration and improving one's memory power as also will-power. The precept that 'practice makes perfect' unquestionably holds good in the field of developing concentration. Eschewing or avoiding all things that disturb one's concentration, to the extent possible or practicable, is the first step. Relentless and unbroken attempt at concentration, say, on a standard textbook of one's choice, spread over a sufficiently long period of time, forms the second step. Since interest and attention go together, it follows that one should manage to create a positive interest in the field of one's study. That young people who complain of difficulty in concentrating on their studies are admirably able to reel off formidable statistics, even at a moment's notice, on the cotemporary cricket matches or stars of the silver screen proves this point!

Improvement of concentration automatically enhances memory-power too. Repetition and recapitulation is another method that helps in this.

One can strengthen one's will-power by deliberately choosing to do things which are unpleasant but not unrighteous; as, for instance, waking up early in the morning. Even this becomes possible and practicable if pursued gradually, like pushing back the time by five or ten minutes every week.

As for obtaining wisdom and imbibing culture as also a value-system, the best means are the holy books and ideal teachers and leaders. A reverent study of these books and the lives of the great ones will make us not only wise but also inspired. A wise man often learns from the faults of fools. So observing the world carefully and introspecting over observed facts will definitely add to the treasury of one's wisdom. Since learning is a continuing process, and a true student never stops learning, life with its vagaries and vicissitudes will teach man more lessons.

And lastly, we come to the desire to achieve something worthwhile in life, especially in the field of work. Obviously, if sufficient attention has been paid to body-building and mind-reforming aspects of one's personality, this task will become much easier. Even then, it has its own techniques and methods. The basis of them all is proper planning and hard work. No doubt, an element of luck or God's grace is also necessary in the ultimate success of one's endeavours. But without them success can never come. God helps him who helps himself!

Proper planning presupposes knowledge, intelligence and competence on the part of the planner. Hard work assumes will-power behind it, a power that ever strives but never yields. Curiously enough, these take us back again to the same source, the mind, and the need for its total development.

Mind, which has been called *antaḥkaraṇa* ('the inner instrument') has great power. This power, which is in a latent state in most of us, can be unfolded by purifying the mind. Prayer, meditation on God and Japa or repetition of the divine name cleanse the mind so thoroughly that this power is fully awakened enabling us to achieve great things in life.

So anyone who is cherishing great ambitions in life, especially the youth, should pay the greatest attention to mind-culture.

'If you mind your mind, the mind in turn will mind you!'—is a good maxim that confers maximum benefits in life.