Personal Practice: Character Matters
Category : January/February/March 2012
Published by senthil on Dec. 06, 2011

Personal Practice

Character Matters

Swami Vivekananda emphasized the need to re-educate ourselves on how to acquire and keep that most cherished of personal qualities, good character

By Swami Atmashraddhananda

"Build your character!" a good number of people in today's world do not think this is good advice. To substantiate their stand, they cite the examples of a large number of people, morally bankrupt and without much of a genuine character, who are "doing well" in life. Such characterless people become their role models, and they think their own lives should be fashioned on these lines. "Why should I be playing a different tune when everyone else is dancing to the tune of dishonesty and hypocrisy?" They continue to indulge in this line of thinking until they face the consequences of absence of character or moral bankruptcy themselves.

Shaken up by those harsh facts, they become humble and begin to look for an answer. They soon learn, if they are sincere, that one cannot blame others for one's weakness. One must accept oneself and try to do better. Character building, hence, is a deeply personal and intimate issue. One cannot sit in a corner with his hands clasped and say, "How does my character matter?" Nor can one escape the consequences of lack of character building. Character matters in more than one way; and character building is the perpetual challenge confronting everyone, individually and collectively.

Spiritual life sans character building is like constructing a house without any mortar or cementing agent. Though all mystic traditions speak of moksha or spiritual liberation, a state beyond even the issue of character building, no one denies that character building alone is the guiding principle in all spiritual matters.

What, really, is character?

Swami Vivekananda gave a most complete definition of character. He said, "Every work that we do, every movement of the body, every thought that we think, leaves such an impression on the mind-stuff, and even when such impressions are not obvious on the surface, they are sufficiently strong to work beneath the surface, subconsciously. What we are every moment is determined by the sum total of these impressions on the mind."

Swami went on, "What I am just at this moment is the effect of the sum total of all the impressions of my past life. This is really what is meant by character; each man's character is determined by the sum total of these impressions. If good impressions prevail, the character becomes good; if bad, it becomes bad. If a man continuously hears bad words, thinks bad thoughts, does bad actions, his mind will be full of bad impressions; and they will influence his thought and work without his being conscious of the fact.

"In fact, these bad impressions are always working, and their resultant must be evil, and that man will be a bad man; he cannot help it. The sum total of these impressions in him will create the strong motive power for doing bad actions. He will be like a machine in the hand of his impressions, and they will force him to do evil. Similarly, if a man thinks good thoughts and does good works, the sum total of these impressions will be good; and they, in a similar manner, will force him to do good even in spite of himself."

Repetition, or repeated thinking of a thought or happening of an action, creates what we call character. It is an outcome of experience, of thoughts and actions, of reactions and responses--of life itself. In Swamiji's insightful words: "Karma in its effect on character is the most tremendous power that man has to deal with. Man, as it were, is a center, and is attracting all the powers of the universe towards himself. Good and bad, misery and happiness, all are running towards him and clinging round him, and out of them he fashions the mighty stream of tendencies called character and throws it outwards." This means that character is the result of whatever we do and do not do (for not doing is also a kind of action).

Can we alter our nature?

Is character inherited, or is it subject to change? Can one change one's character? This is an important issue that bothers most human minds. Understanding it is essential to the whole process of character building. According to Swamiji, the birth of a person does have a role to play. He said once, "One child is born of a divine nature, another of a human, others of lower character."

While parentage and the formative period of one's life cast an influence on one's character, every human being has an opportunity to change himself. He can make a choice to change himself. If it were not so, all spiritual counsels would be meaningless, all scriptures would turn ineffective and man will remain condemned forever. If past actions have played a role in making our present character, it naturally follows that our future character will be determined by what we do now.

Swamiji explains: "Look back on yourselves from the state of the amoeba to the human being; who made all that? Your own will. Can you deny then that it is almighty? That which has made you come up so high can make you go higher still. What you want is character, strengthening of the will."

Training the will means training or controlling the senses and the mind and not being controlled by them. Kathopanishad speaks of the human personality as a chariot: "Know the atman to be the master of the chariot; the body, the chariot; the buddhi (discriminating faculty), the charioteer; and the mind, the reins. The senses, they say, are the horses; the object, the roads. A man who has discrimination for his charioteer, and holds the reins of the mind firmly, reaches the end of the road; and that is the supreme position of Vishnu (the all-pervading consciousness)."

The whole process of character building lies with our thoughts, or to be more precise, with our willpower. It is the will which needs to be trained. To this end, one should become the master of the chariot, instead of becoming a slave to the horses (the senses) and the reins (the mind or thoughts). This is an inner training wherein the charioteer (buddhi) has to learn to control the mind and senses, and not be controlled by them. Said Swamiji: "He who has succeeded in attaching or detaching his mind to or from the centers at will has succeeded in pratyahara, which means, 'gathering towards,' checking the outgoing powers of the mind, freeing it from the thraldom of the senses. When we can do this, we shall really possess character."

Self-control

Let us next look at character building from the viewpoint of spiritual life, where meditation plays a central role. Meditation depends upon concentration, and concentration depends upon withdrawal of the mind, which, again, depends upon self-control. Self-control, which signifies mastery over the mind and the senses, is therefore the secret of all success in meditation, and also of mastering the character-building process.

Self-control is a way of life. It is based on exercising and strengthening one's will on the right lines. One has to learn to control one's cravings and channel them in healthier means of expression. Chastity, truthfulness and genuine sympathy are the three indispensable components of a true character.

The approach to character building should be always positive. One should emphasize one's nurturing positive virtues rather than getting rid of vices. A widespread trend these days is to emphasize the importance of overcoming addiction to alcohol, drugs or other compulsive habits. This focus emphasizes their harmful effects but fails to emphasize what one should do in place of such habits. The result is that people keep attending camps or seminars and continue with their wrong habits.

Nor should one confuse character with talents. By talent is meant some special trait or capacity to do something, such as singing, writing or public speaking. One should not forget that while we admire talent, it is character that we really respect. Talent may bring us some fame and reputation, but it is character which is the real man.

Swami Vivekananda rightly pointed out: "If you really want to judge the character of a man, look not at his great performances. Every fool may become a hero at one time or another. Watch a man do his most common actions; those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man. Great occasions rouse even the lowest of human beings to some kind of greatness, but he alone is the really great man whose character is great always, the same wherever he be."

The company one keeps matters

One of the greatest helps in character building is to associate with men of character. If one is fortunate enough to find such company, one finds subtle

changes taking place in one's own character. Company has a profound impact on the type of character one develops. More than what we are asked to do, it is the example of our associates and role models that affects us most.

But sometimes we are not so fortunate. In that case, reading and deep thinking over the lives and teachings of men of character is of much help. One should fill one's mental atmosphere with holy and inspiring thoughts. Since we become what we admire, we should choose our objects of admiration and adoration with care.

To conclude, character building is the way to spiritual growth and is also the fruit of all spiritual realization. It is foundation of true education also. To restrict education to acquisition of knowledge (or mere degrees, as is often the case) is to not get educated at all. One may lack academic knowledge, but if he has trained his will, purified and controlled his mind, he is then truly educated. He alone is able to live a true life and contribute to it meaningfully. Training of will should be the ultimate goal of all education.

Be it in secular matters or spiritual matters, building a noble and pure character is the only lasting solution to life's problems. Character is not built only in the silence of meditation (though meditation is of great help) but in the broad daylight of right action.

Swami Atmashraddhananda is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order and editor of The Vedanta Kesari (chennaimath.org), from which this article was excerpted.