

Vivekananda Vidyapith Youth Day Celebration: January 8, 2017

Swami Atmajnanananda's speech: "Competition and Cooperation"

"Wow! I don't know how to start. I really feel blown away by what I have seen so far. Let me first give my thanks. I will thank Aunty first, then Uncle, because Swami Vivekananda in his Chicago lecture addressed all saying, 'sisters and brothers of America' and not 'brothers and sisters'! The accomplishment that we see before us was years in the making. Vivekananda Vidyapith is really something - just a mind blower. We don't have another such example of an institution like this throughout the whole country. I keep telling people that we should have a template of Vivekananda Vidyapith, so that this institution and its activities could be reproduced at other places. But, the only problem we have is that we can't reproduce our Aunty and Uncle.

The speeches that I have heard this morning have really been just remarkable. I have to admit that I suffered from stage fright when I was young. I still don't know how much I have overcome it, I'll tell you the truth. We had to give President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address starting with "Four score and seven years ago." I'd freeze after that. So, when I saw the poise that the children had during and after their speeches, I was very much impressed. They presented wonderful ideas. I marveled at their speeches. I must say that 'public speaking' is a tremendous tool for them to learn. I was telling people earlier that when they give a list of the greatest fears that people have in life, very often fear of death will be #2, and fear of public speaking will be #1. So, for many people worse than death is that they have to stand up in front of a group of people and speak. And the self-confidence these students are learning is something that will stay with them throughout their lives. It is really a great blessing. It will help them in their life in all possible ways.

Now, the topic that Uncle had chosen for me today is "Competition and Cooperation." It is a very appropriate topic. The idea of competition and the idea of cooperation are very good. I will be reading some of the quotes from Swami Vivekananda and my plea for the judges is don't deduct 5 points for this reading.

My preliminary remark is that everything what we see in the name of competition doesn't include this type of "Youth Day Speech Competition". There is nothing negative about this type of competition. We heard the first set of speakers talk about the difference between competing with oneself and competing with others. That is the best kind of competition when we are competing with others because we are really hoping that everyone wins. And so far I haven't seen any losers.

Swami Vivekananda has made many strong remarks against competition. But, I think, if Swamiji could be here and could witness all of this "Youth Day Speech Competition", he would be thrilled. It is a wonderful thing that the students could be able to put these ideas that they are learning concisely into a two minute talk. So this is all my preliminary stuff.

Now, let me tell you that Swami Vivekananda actually spoke quite often and wrote in his letters about this topic 'competition and cooperation'. He made a very strong distinction between the two of them. We find that he made some really negative comments about competition even though we'll see that there are many positive things about it also. But, Swami Vivekananda was against the idea of competition when it is used to rise above others and looking upon others as our opponents or our enemies, trying to get others, trying to place ourselves higher at the expense of others. He thought that from one point of view this idea of competition was manifesting itself in materialism, coming out from a materialistic, capitalistic type of society, and he wanted to see something higher than that.

He said *"It seems that such a tide of world-weariness has come upon the Western world. There, too, they have their thinkers, great men; and they are already finding out that this race after gold and power is all vanity of values; nay, most of the cultured men and women there, are already weary of this competition, this struggle, this brutality of their commercial civilization, and they are looking forward towards something better."*

The idea of competition is something that Swami Vivekananda really understood and he accepted it is as something very natural even in the animal kingdom. Swamiji spoke about this idea of winning the competition. This is how people survive, species survive in this world. If we don't compete with others, if we can't adapt to different circumstances, then the species won't even continue. But, Swamiji said this works very well in the animal kingdom - but when we reach a certain level in humanity, then if we want to rise ourselves higher than that, then this competition must give way to cooperation. Suppose we did our best, but reach to a point where we find that we didn't do much better. Now, we will accomplish more if we work with others rather than working against others, and then we will feel better about ourselves. So, this is the basic distinction that we find between the general idea of competition and Swamiji's idea of competition.

Swami Vivekananda also felt that envy and jealousy were two of the greatest problems in this world. He said, especially in India, after so many years of foreign domination, that there was this tremendous feeling of jealousy for anyone who succeeded. So, he attributed this to this competitive attitude they had.

Swami Vivekananda said *"if competition rouses envy, then it kills the kindliness of the heart... Everything that has selfishness for its basis, competition as its right hand, and enjoyment as its goal must die sooner or later."*

Let us go back to the idea of evolution. See how as a species we evolve from the lower species to the human level, and then we must evolve to the higher, to the divine level. Swami Vivekananda said *"These competitions and struggles and the evils that we see are not the effect of the involution or the cause, but they are in the way. If they did not exist, still man would go on and evolve as God, because it is the very nature of that God to come out and*

manifest Himself. To my mind this seems very hopeful instead of that horrible idea of competition.”

In one of his letters he says that “If there would be no eternal life, still the enjoyment of spiritual thoughts as ideals is keener and makes a man happier, whilst the foolery of materialism leads to competition and undue ambition and ultimate death, both individual and national.”

Now, let us see if there is anything positive about competition. Well, we see that many of the gains in society, many of the great discoveries came as a result of tremendous competition. If we look at the space race – there was tremendous competition between what was then USSR and the United States. Because of that competition we can now probably go to Mars. We have heard so many references to that today. Look at the field of medicine. I have noticed the role of competition personally in that field because many of our devotees work in laboratories doing research. There is a tremendous competition to come up with new drugs and new cures for different diseases. Now, the basis of this for the scientists is generally a pure motive. They really want to help people. But, because of the competition they want to make a lot of money. And then there would be some who would be doing it to have a big name. They would be very famous if they find a certain cure. Now what Swami Vivekananda is saying that yes, it is true that competition does have some positive results, but if all of these people could work together, how much more quickly could we come up with different cures for diseases and have different advances?

So, this competition has a negative side but it’s also a sign of life at a certain stage when you are developing. This competition is something that we need. There is a level at which we want to compete for success.

The opposite of competition is a laidback type of attitude. In the laidback attitude, people will not work and think that they are letting other people be successful. Thus, people become lazy. This is replacing rajas with tamas and not with sattva. This is a very important idea and Swamiji stressed this idea very much. We need a little bit of rajas, a little bit of activity, a little bit of competition and a desire to compete with others to save ourselves from tamas. But, we must not make the mistake that competition is our goal and that we want to rise higher than others.

So, this idea that competition is rajas has to be converted to a more sattvic idea – to work with other people. This was a great teaching that Swamiji had. He said that tamas and sattva look very similar but they are opposites. For those who are sunk in this tamas, for those who do not want to do anything, for them it is better to have a little rajas - a little competitive urge thinking that ‘let me be better than the next person’. In this competition, people with tamas are at least doing something. This way, a little bit of rajas will come, but then this sattvica idea should come that no one is really our competitor, and if other people gain something, we also gain together. If we come up with some solution of a human problem either by me or someone else, then it will be a solution for everyone.

We can understand this a little bit in terms of another great teaching of Sri Ramakrishna. That is regarding 'maya and daya'. Maya is not a bad thing, it's a little bit like competition. Maya means that we have some fellow feeling – love for all beings who are my very own. Under the influence of Maya, we love those who are near and dear to us - our own relatives, our own friends or our own countrymen- but at the expense of others. Swami Vivekananda said at one place that the trouble with some devotional movements where we have tremendous love for our own spiritual ideal is that we hate every other ideal. So, in this kind of love, fanaticism can come. Similarly, in Maya we love our own people at the expense of others. This Maya, meaning love for our own people, doesn't have to be thrown away. But Maya should be expanded to Daya which is to have love for all people. Same thing with competition. We don't want to get rid of this urge to compete and be the best that we can. It was a very wonderful topic this morning that we are really competing with ourselves to be the best that we can. Now, we want to expand this personal desire to succeed to a point that it includes everyone. We work hard to succeed ourselves, but simultaneously, we want everyone to succeed.

We saw that Maya, in which we only care about ourselves and our own people, should be expanded to Daya, in which we care about everyone. Similarly, competition gives way to this second idea of cooperation. Cooperation is not a strong enough word. The word cooperation should include the idea of a fellow feeling, the idea of unity, and the idea that there is really no one to compete with. If we understand the spiritual basis behind all of this, if we understand that we really are one, that we are all connected, then my success can't be seen separate from your success because I can't understand myself as being separate from you. If we understand that God is dwelling equally within all beings and if we have the idea of oneness, then who is there to be a stranger, who is there to be an opponent, who is there to compete against?

This is another great teaching that we have, that competitiveness is based on duality, a feeling of difference from others, and when we feel oneness with everyone, then, we want to work together, we want everyone to succeed, we want everyone to be happy. When we have no interest in anyone, we don't have love for anyone or anything, then this is tamas. When we have love for ourselves and for our own people, and don't care about anyone else, then this is rajas, the competitive type of nature. At that time, we should raise ourselves to the sattvica attitude in which we see that we cannot divide this world into us and them. One of Holy Mothers greatest teachings is that no one is a stranger, everyone is our own.

Now, is there ever a time when we don't want to practice cooperation? Any student can tell me when we should not practice cooperation? Yes, when there is injustice, then that is the time when we must take a stand against it and should not cooperate. We have heard this term 'The non-cooperation movement'. We have heard several times the names of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King today and they both engaged in non-violent non-cooperation movement. And this is something - that there are times when we see injustice and we have to take a stand. But the wonderful thing about these two movements (and, of course, they are related – you know that Martin Luther King was very much inspired by Gandhiji and his movement, and remember, Gandhiji was inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David

Thoreau, the Transcendentalist - this way, the inspiration went back and forth) - all of them based their movements on appealing to the humanity and conscience of the oppressor. Gandhiji specifically said "I don't hate the British, I hate what they are doing, but I don't hate them." He saw them as being capable of these emotions of compassion and he appealed to them. Martin Luther King also appealed to that – so it wasn't based on hatred but it was based on the feeling that 'yes, there is divinity in all people even though few people are not doing the right thing'. Thinking that the goodness lies in all people and if we can appeal to that goodness, then non-cooperation movement can work.

We have this beautiful example of Holy Mother. There was one incident that took place during her time when the British had arrested a woman who was pregnant and they made her walk quite a distance to the police office and everyone was up in arms. Holy Mother said that this type of action of the government is intolerable and they won't be able to last long if they continued to do something like this. But, the same Holy Mother who under different circumstances said, "Yes, Britishers are also my children". You remember the story that all her relatives, the young kids and all, wanted to have nice cloths. They didn't care for this *khadi*, this homespun cloth that was made in India at that time. Now, many of her disciples were staunch revolutionaries. They were fighting for the independence of India, and one of the big things was to boycott foreign cloths. Holy Mother's disciples protested buying British clothes. But, Holy Mother said that her relatives would not be happy with this – 'So, get them these nice cloths - after all, the Britishers are also my children.' So, as much as she hated what they were doing, still, she never thought of them as anything other than her very own children.

We see that this idea of cooperation is based on a very high ideal of oneness, and love for all beings without seeing any distinction anywhere. When we see divinity in all, then this oneness comes. As Holy Mother once said, 'everyone is my own child'.

Compared to cooperation, the idea of competition is based on a little bit of distinction. We should have this distinction to feel that, 'yes, I want to be successful, I don't care about the other person.'

Let me quote Swami Vivekananda on competition and selfishness. He said *"Everything that has selfishness for its basis, competition as its right hand, and enjoyment as its goal, must die sooner or later. Give up all these mad pursuits, and then play your part in the universe, as an actor on the stage. The whole vision is changed, and instead of an eternal prison this world has become a playground; instead of a land of competition it is a land of bliss, where there is perpetual spring, flowers bloom and butterflies fly about. This very world becomes heaven, which formerly was hell"*. This goes very nicely with this idea of attitude.

It reminded of a story I have heard when I was a child. I did find out that almost every tradition has a similar story. It's called 'the parable of the long spoons'. Someone wanted to have a vision of heaven and hell. He wanted to know what the difference between heaven and hell is. So, he found a way to get to both the places. First, he was taken to the banquet hall in the hell. He saw people were sitting around a big table. The table was filled with

beautiful food, fruits and drinks. Only thing was that their hands were tied with long spoons. They were trying to eat the food, but it was not going into their mouths. The food was spilling all over on them and around their mouths. Then, he was taken to the banquet hall of the heaven. There the dining arrangement was exactly like the hell. But, there he found that people with their long spoons tied with their hands were feeding people sitting on the opposite side of the table. All were enjoying the delicious food. What was the difference? The attitude. That's what it is. Similarly, in competition, there are two kinds of attitudes. One kind of attitude is that we are competing with the others and we don't care about the others. With this attitude we suffer. In the second kind of attitude, we think about the others and we wish good for the others and other people think about us and wish good for us. This is how this very world can become a heaven.

I will finish yet with one final quote. This was one from a letter that Swami Vivekananda wrote to the Maharaja of Khetri. This Maharaja of Khetri was a young man, more or less of Swamiji's age and Swamiji loved him very much. He was his disciple. It was sad that he died at a very young age. This beautiful letter was written to him. Swamiji wrote, *"There is only one element in life which is worth having at any cost, and it is love. Love, immense and infinite, broad as the sky and deep as the ocean — this is the one great gain in life. Blessed is he who gets it."*

Again, I thank all of you for inviting me here. It is a tremendous privilege. I really invoke the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother and Swamiji that this institution may continue to grow for many years and be a template for many others so that we can have Vidyapiths all over the country. Thank you.