

## My Divine Brothers and Sisters

Namaskar!

I come from India and bring with me warmth and love for everyone here from millions of Swadhyayees from all over the world.

It is not easy to do what I am supposed to do this afternoon—to open a debate on the role of religious people or religions in ethics education. We tend to oversimplify contemporary complexities of life, including ethics education, in face of current short-term policy crises. There is a huge diversity of religions and also diversity of choices and understanding of ethics education. The essence of religion goes beyond the normal limits of knowledge, but ethical values are at the heart of every religion and are lived through every day experiences. All religions do realize that a society with strong ethical foundations is desirable. At the same time, they also acknowledge that it is possible only if the individuals are made to realize their self-worth and potential for self-development. That closest word for religion in Indian texts is *'dharma'*. Dharma, as my father and founder of Swadhyaya Parivar, Pandurang Shatri Athavalc (Dadaji), explained: “is that which holds individuals and society together. It is conducive to self-development and social good. Dharma is a ‘meta’ concept that includes philosophy and spiritualism in a consummate sense, and is integrated into our daily lives.” Though all religions are distinct from each other, they are close to each other in many aspects. What is amazing and convincing about most religions is the fact that they emphasize nearly the same ethical principles. Perhaps, the most important commonality found among them is the idea of cultivating human character on the basis of self-worth, value based life and humane outlook towards others and nature. Everything in this universe is inter-connected—individual to individual, individual to nature and individual to God or by whatever name one may acknowledge the divine and the sacred. The modern predicament is that inter-connectivity is becoming increasingly fragile. Self-worth is eroded and the individual is not equipped to cope with blank spaces in his life. Learning now exists predominately for material gains. It has no relation with ethical values or pursuit of self development. Instead of building character on the basis of respect for humanity, education is exclusively used to cultivate individuals as human resources or robots in the name of national and / or personal advancement.

Rigorous teaching and passive learning now characterizes formal education in most parts of the world. Such a culture of educational practices transforms every subject matter in to collection of information printed in textbooks, prescribed or recommended for a given diploma or degree. In a system where the state authority decides how the schools are run, who teaches in

them and what they teach, official education system is marked by inertia. Decision makers are fearful of any radical departure from what is termed as value free education. It sees ethics education as value-based education, whose benefits are abstract. As ethics education carries heavy religious overtones, it is seen to support tradition and revivalism, as opposed to other subjects that claim to advance scientific temper and/ or secular values.

We need to ask whether there is a need for ethics education at all. Can human beings not live without it? As stated earlier, there are subjects like languages, grammar, sciences, mathematics, history, etc. that one learns. Why is ethics education needed at all? As I am not a specialist, I do not know what advances are being made in the field of education. What I do know is that there is something terribly wrong with education systems world over. Not a day passes without media reporting disruptive behaviour of the young and abnormal increase in juvenile crimes. Given the chaotic times in which we lived and the incapability of the state authority to meet these challenges, one is obligated to recognize the role attributed to moral and ethical values in guiding behaviour at all levels of society.

This brings us to the next question: what is education? Education is both a world in itself and reflection of the world at large. It is a lifelong process whereby human beings learn to fulfill their goals. It can be described as teaching for the purpose of directing behaviour, awakening insight to a sense of right or wrong and to cope with life in all its complexities. Education means to draw out the potentiality of the people for creativity, based on life-sustaining principles and not for livelihood alone. The physical, intellectual, emotional and ethical integration of the individual into a complete man is the aim of education. Indeed, ethics can not be separated from such wholistic education.

Then we need to enquire: whether ethics can be taught? For me, ethics, which is an attitudinal, self-worth realizing and reaffirming 'subject,' can not be taught through textbooks. This contention is supported by the tradition, where I come from. Ethics became prevalent in our families and society in the form of 'Culture'. However, that got adversely affected when our society came under pressure from other influences. The priorities of our society changed and social atmosphere, having profound bearing on the individuals, changed the ethics prevalent in form of 'Culture'. And in such extraordinary times we have felt the need to reintegrate ethics into our daily lives and culture through educational processes.

Ethics is not limited to observance of a set of 'dos' and 'don'ts' in human life. It encompasses within itself, the being, the outlook, the psychology, the mindset, the behaviour, and the internal transformation of an individual. By 'ethics', we do not mean the specific ethics advocated under any specific

religion. Every religion has its own cosmology different from that of other religions. As the essence of all human beings is same everywhere, the ethics also needs to be the same. It is important that everyone should be able to relate on the basis of sharing the same ethical values. Only such an ethics can bind the human race together. Wherever ethics takes firm roots in a society, we can expect people to live with:

1. absolute trust in the unquestionable sacred principles of life that bind the whole universe together;
2. readiness to give up pursuit that are hurdles in the path of relating self with the divine and the other, that is self knowledge or self realization;
3. equanimity, that is, a mindset to overcome rather than to succumb to circumstances and cultivating a mind free from complexes;
4. readiness to sacrifice today's comforts for better tomorrow.

We live as we think. Unless we are imbued with ethical ideas and values, we can not be broad-minded and noble. Initially, the institution of family and the teacher provided the young with ethical ideas to guide them in their lives. Within the worldview of their religious persuasion, they gave the individual the knowledge of one's limitation in the temporal world as well as the need of leading enlightened life—insights that “passeth understanding”. In my tradition the emphasis has been on leading a life that is jnanpurna (full of wisdom), bhavpurna (full of kindness and concern) and krutipurna (ever involved in the welfare of fellow beings). However, overtime the ability of the family and the teacher to facilitate such fusion has declined because of ascendance of individual self-interest and growing importance of the state and the market in the life of the individual.

Though the individual is crucially important to the state and the market, their agenda consists of maximizing national power and economic benefits. Ethics is outside their purview. As a result, despite considerable increments in material assets of the individual and the society, the inner world of the individual and social order in which he/ she is located is under great stress. Individual is now considered as a commodity, measured in terms of education, position and productivity. It has given rise to unhealthy competition, psychological stress, complexes and a deep sense of isolation, insecurity and worthlessness.

In an environment characterized by social and psychological conflicts, grassroots initiatives are idealized as vital component of a desirable social order. These civil society groups are driven by their desire to secure people's rights and entitlements and/ or delivery of welfare relief to the needy, rather than a desire for self-development. They are very much part of discourse on development and democratic governance. Samuel Huntington calls it a 'wave of democratic upsurge' and not an upsurge in ethical values. The civil

society is as far away from ethics education as is the state and the market.

Despite growing ascendance of national planners and policy makers in pursuit of development goals, they have also failed to empower their constitutions to lead qualitatively satisfying lives or to enhance their capacity to build superior communities. Instead, their knowledge and policy inputs, reinforced by different ideological and economic agendas, have undermined the existing communities. They have not gone beyond devising sophisticated statistical tools to measure poverty lines. For them, poverty has only one-dimensional meaning, that is, economic poverty. Their interests hardly ever transcend economic and technological parameters.

It is easy for us, the people of religion, to point out the shortcomings of two major facilitators of the young, the family and the school, to cope with the psycho-social environment as they grow older, and to accuse the state and the market for their indifference to ethical considerations. But the fact remains that religions have also failed in responding adequately to the deed for ethics education, particularly of the young, so that followers of respective religions is largely and perhaps rightly characterized by inflexibility, rigidly, fortress mentality and incomprehension. So, what we see today is that religions show either muted or aggressive defensiveness.

While questions of moral and ethical values are vital to all religions, there are no enforceable rules. It is the individual's responsibility to live by those values. Such internalization of ethical values has been and can be facilitated by religious people by encouraging the young of their faith and other faiths to develop self-worth that can enable them to relate to each other with compassion and love. Both in conditions of scarcity and plenty, people of religion need to foster dignity and self-esteem among their people. Ethics education is one area of maximum convergence among the religions.

Human life without any goals is waste and is likely to go astray. I feel that there is a difference between goals and ambition. Ambition is generally related to material life and status-seeking, whereas goals are or should be for spiritual fulfillment of life. Religion can help the people to choose goals and religious people can lead by example and not merely by preaching. Once goal is set and clear, the pieces of jigsaw puzzle of life fall in places. It also brings order and love for ethical values in life. The young are adept in receptively and hence the youth is the ideal time for setting and choosing the goals in life.

From the very earliest times in India, family and the teacher sought to instill culturally cherished *sanskaras* in the child. (*Sanskara*, a Sanskrit word, conveys the meaning of inward spiritual grace cultivated through socialization of the child.) these two institutions, now greatly enfeebled,

sought to give the child ethics education at the deepest level of experience. At a time when the role of the family and the teacher in the life of the child is eroded, we in *Swadhyaya parivar* have sought to expand that space.

*Swadhyaya* is deeply concerned with individual and social development and harmonious relations among people at every level of the society. It attaches utmost importance to establishing mutuality between fellow beings from childhood onwards. It sees childhood as the ideal time to generate the sentiment of fellowship and development of ethical and spiritual values. What it does is to find out space outside the formal teaching systems by anchoring the young to ethical and cultural values through innovative means.

Through thousands of its Bal Sanskar Kendras (Cultural Centres for Children), *Swadhyaya* offers to a cross section of the very young, both school going and non-school going, a warm intimate and continuing relationship through a number of activities. These Kendras or centers provide an environment conducive to the intellectual, ethical and emotional growth of the young, while giving full play to their creativity. It is done through several ways of articulating ethical values: through inspirational songs, by telling stories from history and historical characters; holding cultural programmes to draw their latent talents in areas such as writing, elocution, story telling, poetry, acting, dancing, singing, directing of plays; organization of sports events, picnic and camps to foster team spirit, an inquiring mind tolerance and adventure.

This may appear not to be much different from extra curricular activities offered during formal schooling years. What is different here is our motivation and conviction that centrality of ethical values needs to be reestablished in our lives, and that this process must begin early on. This has given us courage to introduce new vocabularies, new elements, new modes of operation to offer to the young to participate in qualitatively different ethical enrichment processes that seem natural to them rather enforced from some remote top-down authority. The idea is to give the young an education that enriches them intellectually, emotionally, ethically and culturally to give them strength to face what the life holds for them. And we do this by drawing on inclusive resources of our tradition.

The process does not end with young attaining adulthood. Learning is a life-long process. We have thousands of Youth Centres-paces where the youth regularly meet to discuss and debate for greater clarity of thoughts as they face the complexities of life. After the young person settles in his/ her life there are Swadhyaya Centers where they listen to the life enhancing message of its founder Rev. Dada and try to internalize it and give expression to it through self-less constructive activities leading to social good. This gives

meaning to their lives based on immutable truths and ethical principles.

I will end my remarks by saying that we as people of religion should strive to inculcate among the young a sense of human dignity and sustainable development in ways that seem to be most effective in our respective contexts. We would like to share our knowledge and experiences with those who seek to promote ethics education would over; and also learn from experiences of others.