

# Swami Vivekananda, the Ideal for the Modern Age

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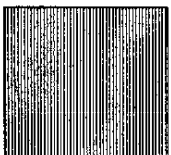
If I were to spend many hours discoursing upon the various aspects of Swami Vivekananda, I would still not be able to give you an adequate idea of him; so every year on the anniversary of his birth I take up a certain aspect of his life and teachings for discussion. This year I have chosen to speak on him as the ideal for modern man. You see, we Vedantins look upon the Swami—and as time passes I believe many others will also look upon him—as one of the very great teachers with which mankind has been blessed.

In India, when we estimate the greatness and the historical position of any of our great teachers, we put them in different categories, and the highest category—the category in which we place Swami Vivekananda—is that of the *jagadguru*, 'World Teacher.' One of the characteristics of such a leader is his deep concern, in utter forgetfulness of himself, for the well-being of mankind. And because we look upon Swami Vivekananda as a World Teacher, we delight in showing how he met and how he would meet the needs of the various communities of mankind, not merely at the present time or through the coming years but through the coming centuries.

One day towards the end of his life he said, 'I have done enough for seven or eight hundred years for the spiritual growth of mankind!'—that is to say, the force that had been introduced into the life of mankind will go on working with full effectiveness for seven or eight hundred years. And on the very day of his passing away he was heard saying to himself that only another Vivekananda would have understood what he had done for humanity. He had a very clear idea of what he had come to do and what he had accomplished.

Some of you might think that that idea came out of an overestimation of himself, a sort of egotism. Yes, there *is* a sort of egotism associated with the great souls of the world. When a Christ says, 'Come all ye that are heavy laden; I shall give ye rest,' there is a supreme egotism in that, and, as you know, some of the contemporaries of the Christ really thought it was egotistic on his part. But then, these great ones are so sure of themselves they do not have to practise modesty and humility as we do; they know what they are. Swami Vivekananda knew what he came to do; he knew what he had accomplished and what effect those accomplishments would produce in the coming history of the world.

Of course, such statements are not enough unless we come to some details. But before I do that I should give you some idea of the life of the great Swami. In other lectures I have sketched his biography, so I shall not do so now; I shall just touch on a few aspects of his life and personality in order to give you some idea of his greatness. There are some present in this congregation who had the good fortune to meet the great Swami here in San Francisco. Having heard him and having been acquainted with him, they can all bear testimony to the fact that even as a physical person he was most impressive and most extraordinary. And I have heard from those who knew him in India that unless one had seen him one could not measure the kind of man he was. One of the great disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, a fellow disciple of Swami Vivekananda, once said, 'Do not try to form any idea of Swami Vivekananda by seeing us. Don't form any idea! He was so different and so much greater than any one of us that you would



*Text of a heretofore unpublished lecture delivered on January 11, 1953, at the Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco, by Swami Ashokananda (1893–1969), a monk of the Ramakrishna Order. Among his books are included Spiritualizing Everyday Life, When the Many Become One, and Meditation, Ecstasy and Illumination. □*

not be able to infer his greatness from us.' And that was literally true.

As you know, he was the disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary person himself. It matters little how one looks upon him—whether one looks upon him as an Incarnation of God or as a great Prophet or as a great saint, a knower of God—it doesn't really matter at all. I sometimes think that labelling is one of the great diseases of the human mind. The moment we make a package of a thing, put a label on it, and put it away on a shelf, we forget it. This is one of the tricks by which mind sheds the responsibility of facing any great phenomenon that is presented to it. It is much better that we study these great lives without labelling them. It doesn't matter what we call Sri Ramakrishna, but I do not think, so far as we have any evidence either in tradition or in history, that there has ever been another person who has shown such greatness, spiritually and otherwise. That a human being could be so pure, so absolutely free from all the weaknesses to which the human mind is subject, that in this human body there could be such an extraordinary manifestation of spiritual grandeur was inconceivable until one had met Sri Ramakrishna. It is not befitting that I grow eloquent about this, because I was not an eyewitness of his greatness; however, I have the excuse of having witnessed the greatness that was revealed in many of his disciples, and if the disciples were as great as they seemed, then I can quite well imagine that all the things that were said about their Master fell short, very short indeed, of the reality. Well, Sri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary revelation, and Swami Vivekananda was his chief disciple and, if I may use this expression, the darling of his heart.

Sri Ramakrishna first saw the Swami (who was then known as Narendranath Datta, or Naren) in Calcutta in November of 1881. He recognized that here was a great soul and invited him to visit him at the temple at Dakshineswar, a few miles north of the city. Soon thereafter the Swami went there in fulfilment of his promise, and the Master took him aside and stood before him with folded hands: 'Lord, you have come to earth for the good of mankind. I have been waiting for you. Why did

you take so long to come here?' Swami Vivekananda, who was in his nineteenth year, was just flabbergasted. He began to wonder about the sanity of this man; yet he could not but be impressed by his spirituality, his utter sincerity and purity. Moreover, he was the first person in the young man's experience who told him that he had actually seen God, that he always saw God as clearly as one sees the things around oneself, only much more intimately, and that he could tell him how he, too, could see God. He was the first person who had spoken of God to Swami Vivekananda out of experience and not merely out of faith and belief.

My friends, I need not tell you in this twentieth century that all this talk of faith and belief has very little substance in it. Don't ever forget this. I am not saying these critical things about faith in order to destroy; I am saying them because I am fully convinced that you and I and every one of us—whoever has a little desire for spiritual experience—is capable of having it. Men and women are not children of God for nothing. The son of a king certainly can claim the privilege of royalty from his father. If we are God's children, we ourselves are divine, and to say that it is not given to us to experience God, that all we have to do is to listen to somebody telling us that this is so and that is so is an indignity to our inherent divinity. We don't have to listen. I would not say these drastic things if I did not know that if you make up your mind, you are even now, while you are still living in this body, capable of having such experience of God that you will not have to listen to somebody else to know that God is your own Father, your own Mother, your own Friend, the Soul of your soul. There is no reason for any sincere and serious person to pass this life without at least realizing this much—that God is a living reality, the very Soul of our soul. There is no reason for not realizing it. And so Sri Ramakrishna told Swami Vivekananda that God can be seen. That was a very important teaching, and from that time the Swami's discipleship began.

The young man, Naren, would not accept anything until he was convinced by reason and by his own experience. Sri Ramakrishna would tell him of *his* experiences, the innumerable experi-

ences that he had had in the past and was having every day. Naren would say, 'Oh, this is all your superstition and hallucination. I won't accept it until I have been convinced by my own experience.' Sri Ramakrishna, great man and great Master that he was, allowed all freedom to his disciples. 'Very good,' he would say, and eventually, even during the lifetime of the Master, the Swami began to have his own experiences, and then he knew these things were all true.

It is customary for us to think that all greatness is intelligent and rational; of course, it *is* intelligent and rational, but there is also an element in it that is superrational. To say that everything is only intelligent and rational is to make it commonplace. If I say, 'Oh, what a rational person was Swami Vivekananda!' all I am saying is that I am capable of understanding him. Just imagine this—I make myself the measure of a Vivekananda's greatness. What kind of greatness do you think that would be? There always has to be something beyond my grasp. I am a small man, and if he is truly great, I must discover at every step a greatness which I cannot measure, which my reason cannot now conceive, but which is a challenge to my reason, making me climb higher and yet higher, until I myself become great. Whether there would ever come a time when I would be able to comprehend his greatness, I don't know, but one thing would happen to me: I would always grow better and greater, better and greater. That's one of the signs of another's greatness. And of course there was this element of the supernatural about the great Swami.

Sri Ramakrishna used to maintain that there is a realm where perfection lives. And he said, 'I went there and found seven perfect beings plunged in eternal meditation, and I persuaded one of them to come down to the earth. I said to him, "The world is burning in misery. Come down and help." And that is Naren.' That is what the Master used to say. You may not believe those things, but I wanted to tell you Sri Ramakrishna's estimate of his disciple. He used to say, 'Naren is *dhyāna-siddha*,' or again, 'He is so free and so pure that he is like a roaring fire.' Just as anything you put in a roaring fire will get burned, in the same way, his

purity was so great nothing could defile him, nothing. Of all Sri Ramakrishna's disciples, this was the only one of whom he had so high an estimation. When he first saw this disciple he said, 'Can it be possible that in this mundane city of Calcutta there is a man so established in meditation! I looked at him and found him totally unconscious of his body and of his clothes and surroundings.'

At that time Naren was a believer in theism, in devotion to one God, and of course that was far, far away from the idea that man is God Himself. It seems like blasphemy to a devotee to think that man and God are the same. So when Sri Ramakrishna would tell Naren about the monistic view, he would say, 'Sir, don't say such a thing! It is blasphemy even to listen!' But the Master knew his disciple. He would make him read aloud a book in which it is said that man is really absolute Spirit, the same as God. Just as waves rise and fall in the ocean, in the same way universes rise and fall in man; he is so great. Well, after reading a few verses, the Swami would say, 'Sir, I cannot read this. It is blasphemous!' So the Master would say, 'Now, Naren, I am not asking *you* to accept all those things. Can you not read these verses to me? Do you have any objection?' 'No, sir. If you want to listen to it, I can read it to you.' So gradually the Master accustomed his great disciple to the monistic idea.

Then one day the Master told him, 'You know, Naren, everything is God.' 'Everything is God? Do you mean to say this cement floor, this brick wall, this earthen jar—all are God?' 'Yes. All are God.' The disciple was flabbergasted; he could not understand it. So he went out of the room, and there on the porch was an elderly man who was rather critical of Sri Ramakrishna. Naren said to him, 'Do you know what the Master told me today? He said that everything is God—the floor, the wall, the jar, everything.' Just then Sri Ramakrishna came out and asked, 'What are you saying?' 'I was telling him what you told me—that everything is God.' The Master came near him and touched him on the heart, and suddenly he found all material forms disappearing; there was only one Being, God. After some time he came to the normal plane, but it took several days before the

effect of that experience went away. Henceforth he was fully convinced that everything is God.

The Swami was a little less than five years with Sri Ramakrishna. During the last year of his discipleship he went through tremendous spiritual practices and experiences, until one evening he realized the highest experience, in which the soul becomes one with God and realizes it is indeed divine. Anyone who has this experience, which we call *nirvikalpa samâdhi*, becomes completely changed. Henceforth one can never feel one's identity with this mind or with this body; nor can one feel that matter is matter; everywhere one perceives the pervading presence of divinity. One lives henceforth in the eternal, although on the borderland of time. That is what Swami Vivekananda realized during the last months of his Master's life.

A short time before Sri Ramakrishna passed away he gave monastic initiation to eleven of his disciples, and he gave charge of them to Narendra. He said, 'Train them and look after them always. Hold them together.'<sup>1</sup> And to the other monastic disciples he said, 'Henceforth follow Naren and take care of his body; it is a precious body.'<sup>2</sup> That is how the Ramakrishna Order of monks was made. After the Master passed away there came a period in which all these disciples, twelve and more, lived together in a monastery, forgetting day and night, forgetting food—they had very little to eat anyhow. There was only one amongst them (Swami Ramakrishnananda) who thought it his duty to look after their bodily needs. He used to cook, used to drag them from meditation to make them eat a little. In this way, several years passed, and then they went out one by one, wandering all over India, as Indian monks usually do. Swami Vivekananda also went out, wandering alone.

At one time Sri Ramakrishna had asked Naren, 'What do you want?' and Naren replied, 'I want to remain in samâdhi forever.' The Master was very much annoyed. He said, 'I had better hopes for you. I didn't know that you were so low-

minded!' Those are exactly the words he used. 'You are being very selfish. I had hoped that you would become like a big banyan tree under which people burned by the heat of worldly existence would find shelter and comfort, and here you are talking about your own joy, remaining plunged in meditation! No! You will have to do my work!' But for a few years after Sri Ramakrishna passed away, the Swami went around restless. One of his fellow disciples wrote that all his life the Swami was restless, as if he were on fire; he could not sit comfortably anywhere. Many people used to notice this tremendous restlessness in him. It was not the restlessness of the mind, because at will not only could he make his own mind quiet, he could make another person's mind quiet also—he had that power. By a touch he could change other people. Then why was he so restless? You see, originally he had come from the world of meditation. That is the true existence, isn't it?—where you know the whole reality in all its unimpeded glory and perfection and have nothing else to know. Just as a bee, when it has found honey in the flower, sits there quietly sipping the honey and does not buzz and hum, in the same way, when we have found the total reality, our whole being becomes quiet. That is meditation. The Swami came from that realm, and even while he lived here he experienced it. He couldn't remain peaceful short of that experience. It continually goaded him. In the meantime, he had to do his Master's work, and he did it. The Master got such a man to do his work in this world—a man who always wanted to go back to the Absolute!

You might say he could have chosen a better person—someone who would have been more at home in this world, not always wanting to run away. Ah, that is not God speaking; God knows differently. Don't you know that unless the river continually flows, it cannot make its banks green and fertile? The river has to run away from the place it wants to benefit. If the river said, 'Oh, I am so fond of this land, I want to do it good; so I shall stay here,' it would become a swamp, unbearable. But the river runs away. Always remember this: only he who runs away from the relative can benefit the relative. A person who has

1 Swami Gambhirananda, *History of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission*, 3d rev ed (Calcutta Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 29

2 *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols, 5th ed (Calcutta Advaita Ashrama, 1979-81), 1 164, 182

become bound by life makes a poisonous swamp of it. That is what we do. We are caught in life; we are so addicted to it! We want to help the lives of one another, and we make a mess of everything. Only he who has gone beyond life can enrich life. That's the secret of it all; and the Master knew it.

Well, the Swami wandered alone for several years in India, and in the beginning of 1893 he suddenly came across two of his monastic brothers. As customary, they compared notes, and the Swami said, 'I don't know what spiritual realization I have, nor do I care. A great change has taken place in me and I *feel* now; I feel the sorrow of men so deeply within me that if I could help one person by going to hell, I am ready to go to hell a thousand times. I feel like that.' He pointed to his heart: 'This has become very large.' Shortly afterwards he came to this country—America.

In the course of a lecture on Sri Ramakrishna that he gave in New York in early 1896 he said, if you want to help others, if you want to help the world, you have to fulfil three conditions: One is that you must feel; you must so feel that you will forget to sleep, forget to eat, forget to rest; you will become so restless that you will forget your own needs completely. The second condition is that you must think and think and find an adequate way by which the suffering of humanity can be removed. Mere feeling is not enough; that's too cheap, too sentimental. You have to bring brain to the problem and find the cause of this suffering and the remedy for it. The third condition is that you must have the will power, the determination to work according to the way you have found for the relief of suffering. Have you got the determination such that if the whole world forsakes you, you will go on fighting alone for mankind? If you fulfil these three conditions, then you are ready to serve.<sup>3</sup> Swami Vivekananda fulfilled them all.

He had a gigantic intellect. Don't ever be deceived by reading his works, most of which are lectures, that he did not think. He was a great scholar, very fond of study. How many thousands

of books he studied, nobody knows, and he had a fabulous memory. Once he had read a page, he would retain it in his memory forever. Those who had known him used to say that you could not form any idea of his vast scholarship by his spoken, or even his written, words. You see, he was not essentially a scholar; he was a World Teacher who wanted to give truth for the benefit of all; therefore, as he himself said in one of his letters, he tried to reduce all these profound, complicated truths to the most simple principles and put them into the most impressive statements he could. That was his one effort; but that is why, as you read his works, you don't come upon all the scholarly details which burden the books of philosophers. Still, he had that scholarship.

I am mentioning this because his service to mankind was not just a sentimental hobby; it came out of a deep understanding. And I may at this time point out to you that of all the great Teachers that man has known, he is the one World Teacher, spiritual teacher, who thought of man in all his aspects. No other has done that. Consider each one—Sri Krishna, Buddha, Christ—consider them all, you will find that each has thought of men and women essentially in their spiritual aspect: that is, how to bring them to God, how to provide spiritual salvation for them. None made man as a whole the subject of his concern. Of course, this is not to say that to take up mankind as a whole is to eliminate the question of salvation. Not at all. Spiritual regeneration and the liberation of man are the most essential things, but to say that they are the *only* things regarding man is not to face the problems. Only a handful of people at any time is ready to practise and try for liberation directly. A large number are candidates for this highest experience, true; a still larger number probably are treading the path but are yet far, far off from the destination. And there is still a vastly larger number of men and women who are not directly conscious of any spiritual objective, but who through living with dignity in the world, living in self-confidence and self-respect, have to pass through lower stages before they become aware of other goals—goals which must be attained if man is to fulfil himself.

<sup>3</sup> See *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8 vols, 10th ed (Calcutta Advaita Ashrama, 1972), 4 158–59 [Hereafter cited as CW]

Who has cared for this vast number of men and women, these millions and millions? True, there have always been great thinkers who have tried to solve the economic, political, social, cultural, educational, and intellectual problems of mankind, and certainly mankind is grateful to them. But they left out one thing: they did not know what man truly is; they knew man only superficially. Today, you recognize that you cannot know a person merely by studying his body. You are accepting as a truism that bodily life is intimately connected with psychological life. Tomorrow you will begin to think that psychological life is based on spiritual life. Even the superficial existences of people are rooted in profound depths, and unless we have penetrated these depths we will not be able to evaluate their health or disease, physical or mental; nor will we understand what people are trying to accomplish here, wherefrom their desires and motives spring, what direction these should be given. Although to these great thinkers we bow our head in gratitude, we cannot but recognize that they have failed in penetrating the depths of man. They were not spiritually illumined souls. Great writers, great poets, great philosophers there have been; there have been savants in many fields; we are grateful to all of them, but we cannot but think that, after all, they are still blind; they also need direction. They take us only so far; they cannot take us further, and we are not always sure that they have taken us in the right direction.

So Swami Vivekananda was a man unique. He who was ever plunged in the living consciousness of God had feeling for every aspect of humanity. He used to spend hours experimenting on preparing a food that would nourish the Bengali body! You might think there is nothing special about that, but, you see, a man who has once lifted his heart to God-consciousness finds it extremely difficult to bring it down to the little details of ordinary existence—extremely difficult. It was only the sheer force of his concern, his love for suffering man, that enabled him to do it.

I have on occasion said that this is the age not of God but of Man, and no doubt some of you have been rather startled by such a statement from

the lips of a minister of religion. But when I say that this is the age of Man, I am not divorcing Man from God; all I am saying is that human beings are themselves God and that in their relative aspect they are something more besides. I am saying that this age will continually claim greater and greater energy, time, and service from us for the benefit of human beings in all their aspects. You can quite well see that in this respect Swami Vivekananda represented the time spirit.

The modern age has opened wide the gates of knowledge to all. The Swami used to say, 'Don't be afraid to tell everyone all the truth.' It has been said, 'Don't tell everything to everybody; it will only upset them.' But that was not the Swami's way. Yes, some will be hurt, but some will be hurt anyhow, whatever method you adopt. If you don't tell them the truth, that will also hurt them. The time has come, he used to say, when all truths should be spread broadcast to all. That was his mandate. He had supreme faith in truth; he felt that truth could never do harm. It can be painful in its first impact upon us, but it is always beneficial. That was his conviction and conclusion. And so he asked that every truth be spread broadcast. Man lives in the world, he has to have food, he has to have the means of livelihood, he should be free from disease, he should not die like a fly; he should live with the dignity of a king. In one of his lectures in San Francisco the Swami said in effect, What is democracy? Formerly there was one person who could be considered king, and all bowed before him. Today, in America at least, every person is a king; *that* is democracy.<sup>4</sup> Sovereignty has come to everyone, and that is what he wanted everyone to be—nothing over his head except the wide, wide sky, growing in self-confidence because of self-control and because of greater and greater knowledge, having the ability to live in dignity, aspiring after high ideals. Why should not men and women hold their heads high? That was the Swami's expectation.

In one of his letters he wrote, 'Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man. Religion is the manifestation of the divinity al-

4 See CW, 1977, 8 125

ready in man.’<sup>5</sup> See what a nice distinction he made. Perfection includes divinity, of course, but it means a little more. You might almost say that he gave a higher place to education than to religion. Religion as it is ordinarily understood is limited to the conception of attaining to God, whereas man, a human being, has many other things in him because of which he is man. And so the Swami pondered long on what man is, what he needs, what will make man a man. Therefore he used to say in later years, ‘My religion is a man-making religion.’ And he said, ‘The more I live, the more I find the whole thing is contained in this one word—Man!’ Manliness was his watchword. Not Godliness—*Manliness*.<sup>6</sup>

Look around yourselves. All over the world people are saying, ‘What can religion do? It is good, but can it really solve our problems? Often it is an impediment.’ And I know that many of you in America who go to churches and believe in the efficacy of religion, would not surrender everything to religion. You would protest, ‘We have to do many things ourselves. You mean to say we have to go only to church? No! We have to do all kinds of things—engineering, soil conservation, prevention of erosion, building dams, spreading industry, making machines—so many things we have to do! Why not?’ If I tell you that it is the destiny of human beings to suffer and die prematurely, you would laugh in my face. You would say, ‘Oh, you come from an old, old country. We don’t believe in such destiny. We Americans believe in life; we have accomplished many things. We have conquered diseases, we have lowered the mortality rate, and we can do even better things.’ Here is the modern person speaking. He doesn’t believe he has to die like a fly. He wants divinity everywhere. That is the cry of the modern times.

And Swami Vivekananda accorded that right to man. He said yes, that is what a human being should be. In one of his more compassionate letters he wrote, ‘Every dog must have his day. Should

only a handful of people enjoy the comforts of this life? No, everyone should have his share.’ Mind that, such a thing could be said only in the present age, but it had to be said, and it had to be said by a man who was a prophet of religion.

About his own country, he wrote in one of his most beautiful books, ‘The future India will be made up of the masses of people, not of the few who are sitting at the crest of the country now, but of the masses.’ He used to say that that is the destiny of the whole world—the masses will constitute the greatness of future generations.

Now, some of you will at once object: ‘Crowds of boorish people will dominate everything!’ Why do you think that only a handful of people should enjoy life and live with dignity? It is unbecoming for an American to speak such language. If this country is honoured for anything, it is honoured for the dignity it has accorded to the common man. Swami Vivekananda used to say, ‘In New York I have seen Irish immigrants getting off the boats, fearful, afraid of looking anybody in the face. In six months, the same person is changed; his eyes are clear, his head is held straight; he can look the other fellow in the eye; he is not afraid anymore.’ That is what freedom does, that is what America stands for in the eyes of the world, and yet I have found that when these things are spoken of, Americans get frightened. It is a shame that such an attitude should grow in this country. But I see a real fear, and I have full sympathy with it.

I have not the slightest use for the glorification of the physical and economic man; that is worse than death. Man, because he has an immortal soul, cannot really die out; if he could, then everything would be solved. But to be reduced to the status of an animal and yet continue to live is worse than death. That is why I have no use for merely the economic ideal; whether it is spoken of in the name of communism or capitalism, it is spiritual suicide. Mere economic equality is not the goal of mankind. But why do you think that the common person cannot be economically, politically, and socially free and at the same time be a cultured, moral, and spiritual person? Why should you think that?

<sup>5</sup> CW, 1972, 4 358

<sup>6</sup> It should not need saying that the word ‘manliness’, as the Swami used it, included the feminine equivalent of the same quality



That was Swami Vivekananda's ideal for his own country and for the whole world, but he knew that the key to the realization of this ideal, as he himself said many times in clear words, is the spiritual vision. Those of you who followed the career of Mahatma Gandhi, remember that he used to preach the doctrine of the service of *daridra Nârâyana*, 'God in the form of the poor'—that is a term he borrowed from Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda taught this worship of the *daridra Nârâyana*. He used to say, 'Learn to see God in everyone.' That's the key! When you go out to a poor man and treat him as merely a poor man and try to make him economically better, you are doing a good deed, but you are also putting a little bit of poison there, which will be terrible afterwards. If you want to help someone, you have to put a little worship there; there has to be reverence; the homage of your heart has to be there. If it is not, no service, no work will prove beneficial in the long run.

Now, let me clarify this further. Let me repeat: whether you speak individually or collectively, if in the service of man you put only work and not worship, that work will never do any good. Never! Don't you see, through the ages people have fed the poor, taken care of their relatives; parents have made all sacrifices for their children; husbands have looked after wives, wives after husbands, children after parents; but human beings have remained the same. The wife has not become a better woman; husband has not become a better man; children have not been any better than generations of children everywhere. Work has been plentiful, but worship was not there. A love that is not accompanied by great reverence, deep reverence, is poison. Maybe you cannot do without it, but let us not deceive ourselves by saying it is something extraordinary. It is not. I have no time now to go into an analysis of why this is so. I am simply stating the fact, a fact that Swami Vivekananda recognized always and impressed continually on our hearts. *Work must become worship* He used to say, 'Let not the beggar thank you; kneel down before the beggar in worship and reverence that he has given you the opportunity of worshipping him, of serving him.'

In India there are millions and millions of people without education, without health, without means of livelihood. One could bring about a revolution, but we don't see any future in that; we do say, however: kneel down, lay down your life in the service of the millions! If you have education, if you do not have to think of your livelihood, your first duty is to serve those who need food, who need education. Go and do it! That was the teaching of Swami Vivekananda.

After he returned from the West in 1897, he organized the Ramakrishna Order in both a monastic and a philanthropic aspect. To the philanthropic aspect he gave the name Ramakrishna Mission. Its purpose is for the monks and the laity to combine together to render all kinds of service, not only to the people of India but to people everywhere, and this not merely in the spirit of humanitarianism but in the spirit of worship, recognizing the supreme truth that man is God Himself. You see, one cannot have a sense of reverence without a sense of truth or reality. You might say, 'What is the use of telling me to worship a beggar, with his ugly teeth and features like those of a gangster! How can I do that? I don't see God there; if I see anything I see the devil.' Ah! There philosophy comes, spiritual vision comes. My friends, if I see a demon somewhere and not God, whose fault is it? It is my fault: my eyes are wrong, my heart is wrong. My philosophy tells me, God is everywhere; everyone is God, everything is God. If I perceive anything as different from God, it is the fault of my own distorted vision; it is nobody else's fault. You are God; you are seated here in the guise of men and women. If I do not perceive you as God, it is the fault of my deficient vision. Nothing has happened to *you*. So since no one can live in falsehood and unreality, since everyone must be true as far as he can, and since I am convinced that everyone is really divine, I shall see to it that every work I direct towards anyone, every action I do unto him or her, every feeling that I have for him or against him becomes corrected. When I say something, let me be convinced that I am speaking to God Himself; when I hear someone's voice, let me know it is God Himself speaking. When I do anything unto someone, let me feel that it is an offering unto the



Lord. If I do not make that effort, then I am falling short of my own philosophy and convictions.

So in this teaching that Swami Vivekananda gave, there is a great challenge to men and women: every moment they should make their thought or action or feeling more and more correct and pure until they recognize that everyone is God alone and nothing but God. You see, here was an extraordinary combination: from one point of view, the point of view of the millions of people who have to be benefited and served, among whom economic, political, social, and educational reforms have to be brought about, you could not think of any better approach than this attitude of reverence and of love and, therefore, of great patience and the purest of motives. If you take a higher view, if you are a seeker of truth, a seeker of spirituality, you could not do better than to remind yourself every moment that you are really in contact with God.

There is a little book called *Inspired Talks*. It contains notes taken of some conversations of Swami Vivekananda in the early summer of 1895. A group of twelve disciples were with him in a cottage at Thousand Island Park on the St. Lawrence River. Every day the Swami would take a book and give a discourse on it. One woman disciple, a well educated person, took down these discourses in longhand and afterwards they were published in India under the title *Inspired Talks*. In that book the Swami said, 'Do not seek Him, just see Him.' What a wonderful statement! Here He is; why should I seek Him? All that is wanted is that I rub my eyes so that I can see clearly.

*Tvameva pratyaksham brahmâsi, tvameva pratyaksham brahma vadishyâmi*, 'I shall declare the Brahman, the God that is ever present before my eyes.'<sup>7</sup> *Sarvatah pâni-pâdam tat sarvato'kshishiro-mukham*, 'Everywhere His feet, everywhere His hands, everywhere His eyes, everywhere His head.'<sup>8</sup> This is God. What prevents us from thinking this way? Is there something other than God? Don't you see that then God would become limited by the something other? A limited God is a dead

God, a mortal God, no God at all. No, there is only God and nothing else. If you say, 'What about the world?' Ah, it is God Himself present before our eyes. This is the *pratyaksham Brahma*, God spread before our eyes. This is *Virât*, the Vast One.

That was the essential teaching of Swami Vivekananda. And he said that this is the age in which the human aspect of this visible God is most emphasized. We ourselves know that our primary concern is with Man. Perhaps for many centuries our preoccupation will be with human beings. So many things have to be done! For thousands of years we have neglected those things. The time has now come when human beings can eat, can clothe themselves, can educate themselves; human beings can live like human beings. This is the first time in history that that opportunity has come, and so Swami Vivekananda taught this most wonderful doctrine.

When your Lord comes in the form of a famished person, will you say, 'Lord, come, be seated here on the throne. What worship shall I render unto You?' The Lord would say, 'A big pot of coffee and lots of sandwiches. That is the worship I want.' When the Lord comes in the form of a sick person, will you say: 'Lord, here are flowers for Your altar'? No! Medicine, that is the worship. Here comes the Lord, illiterate, ignorant. 'Lord, what will please You?' The Lord will say, 'O fool! Don't you know that when I come in the form of an ignorant man, what I want of you is knowledge? That is what will please Me; otherwise why should I take the guise of an ignorant person?' An unhappy person comes: we give him or her happiness; that is the ingredient of our worship. Ah, that's the religion!

Isn't this the teaching for every person in this age? The Swami calls you to the very highest. Rise up as high as you can get; you will find him there still beckoning you to go higher. Intellectually he made no compromise. Many times he declared from the platforms of America and England, 'Man never need fear knowledge. No knowledge will contradict other knowledge.' What are you afraid of? We know that many religions have been afraid of truth. Thousands have been killed because of that fear. But no knowledge will

<sup>7</sup> *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Invocation

<sup>8</sup> *Gita*, 13.13

contradict spiritual knowledge. If there is an apparent contradiction, that is because either it is not true knowledge or the spiritual truth has not been correctly presented. There is no conflict among truths. So come, all truths! Come from all directions! Welcome science, welcome art, welcome poetry, literature, philosophy. Welcome anything that the protean mind of man can discover! This great God, this Vast One, can accept everything. No fear! Do you have to do economic work, slum work, hospital work, educational work? Why, wherever you are, it is an altar of worship!

Now, you might say that's awfully tall talk. My friends, these things have been done. These things are being done! It is not tall talk. If you could catch even a glimpse of this noble ideal, your whole life would change. Homes would become like temples of God. A wife drudging for a husband who comes home drunk, a good-for-nothing man anyhow, if you look at him in a superficial way; wives giving their lives away for such people—what is there in it? But let these very wives think that this man is God Himself, that the being who looks through these eyes, this conscious being, is God Himself, then what does it matter how he looks physically, how he seems mentally? It is as though a well-built man had put on all kinds of shabby clothes; you take off coat after coat, and then you find the resplendent person beneath. This body and this mind are like so many garments. In the West you have attached too much importance to these garments. Too much money you spend, too much attention you give to your clothes, not only metaphorically, but also literally. You give too much importance to bodily appearance. A person is ashamed if his or her body is defective. Why should one be ashamed? It is inconvenient, yes, but what is there to be ashamed of? A person is ashamed if he or she hasn't a brilliant mind. Why? The real person is neither of the mind nor of the body. The real person is he who shines even when this body has suffered eclipse. It is like the sun shining in the eternally blue sky. Even when the sky is covered with the thickest clouds possible, everybody knows that nothing has happened to the sun. What difference does it make whether this

mind and body are defective? The real person is resplendent, forever resplendent. Recognize this fact in everyone, in your children, in your parents, in your husband, in your wife, in your friends, in everyone that you meet. Let not your glassy eyes remain glassy forever; let them learn to penetrate this guise that the Lord has put upon Himself and thereby hidden His own grandeur. Let your eyes learn to penetrate and see Him behind this guise! Smile in His eyes and say, 'Lord, I know, I know.' That's religion, that's service; and when you take this attitude, your battery becomes charged; you don't need any more charges. Every place where people breathe, work, think is a place of worship.

My friends, that's the modern spirit, and, believe me, this is the way it is going to be. Don't ever think that you will go back to the old style of living where a handful of people roll in luxury and millions die of hunger. That day is gone forever. On the other hand, if you think that there will be just one class in which everybody will become unionized and receive higher and higher wages but won't know what to do with their money except to become drunk—if you think that that will be the future of mankind, you are much mistaken. If you think that mankind is going to become atheistic and, as my own countrymen like to say, 'secular,' you are again much mistaken. Man is rising to a height that is unbelievable today because it has never before been reached; man will rise to supreme spiritual heights. You have not seen how God looks upon things, have you? God is also connected with matter; He is also connected with beauty. So when men and women become established in their own spiritual glory and will then sing or paint or write or work or slave—you cannot imagine what kind of thing they will produce. What human beings can be and do is going to be demonstrated for the first time in history. And the leader and exemplar of that future society was Swami Vivekananda.

In 1898 the Swami obtained some property on the west bank of the Gangâ for a permanent monastery. The land was very uneven, full gullies and mounds, so he engaged a group of workers to even it out. He would go there and talk to those

labourers by the hour. It became a problem. The monk who was in charge of the work used to keep him away because he would prevent these people from working. Anyhow, after the whole work was finished, Swami Vivekananda gave these labourers a sumptuous dinner, and afterwards he said, 'Today I saw the Lord Himself eating in all these forms.' He was not speaking poetry; he meant it literally.

It was said that whoever came in contact with him felt all the greatness within himself waking up. The opposite is generally the case: in the presence of greatness we feel all 'smaller down,' but in presence of Swami Vivekananda all latent greatness would rise up. I have heard that from many people. He was like the spring season. In one or two of his letters he quoted a Sanskrit verse with his own translation: 'There are some saints who, full of holiness in thought, word, and deed please the whole world by their numerous beneficent acts and who develop their own hearts by magnifying an atom of virtue in others as if it were as great as a mountain.'<sup>9</sup> Yes, there are such good people on earth. As Shankara said, *vasantaval-lokahitam carantah*—'They move about the face of the earth doing good to mankind, even like the spring season.'<sup>10</sup> When the spring season comes, everything blooms; wherever they go all the greatness comes out in everyone, everyone blooms. Swami Vivekananda was that kind of person. He was the spring season, and he knew it.

His intellect stimulated intellect everywhere; his serviceful, worshipful action stimulated action everywhere. His tremendous concern for the suffering of the poor made everyone who believed in him the servant of the poor. In his name many hospitals have been opened. In his name our monks go from one end of India to the other, and wherever there is a call of distress, they go there. Many hospitals, many clinics, many schools, many colleges, many monasteries have been opened by the Order he founded—the Ramakrishna Order. The monks give service in every respect to the

God who is man, to the man who is God. If that man or woman calls for service to the body—there it is: medicine, nursing, food, relief of every sort is there. If he or she calls for service to the mind—there it is: schools, colleges, literature, papers—all are there; if he or she calls for service to the soul—there it is: spiritual teaching is there, monasteries are there. In every respect men and women are being served. Man is being worshipped—man that is God, God that is man. And this is just the beginning, the first streak of dawn.

You might say, 'That is very fine, but to interpret the quest of modern people in these terms is probably wrong. Religion has done a great deal of harm. Anyhow, who cares for these metaphysics? Just do some simple things like bringing about economic adjustment and a higher standard of living. Why talk all these metaphysics? Just do it!' I have already pointed out to you that things which seem so simple are not so simple. Long ago, about 2500 years ago, there was another man born in India. His name was Siddhartha Gautama. He was the son of a king. For some mysterious reason, some quirk in his brain, he began to worry about the sufferings of others. You must say that that's queer indeed. He had a nice wife, a child had been just born—but he left the world that very night. He went out in search of the cause of suffering. Why? He was a prince; if he had wanted he could have told his father: 'Father, let us open hospitals; let us open all kinds of schools.' It could have been done. But he knew that the cause of human suffering lies deep, deep down. Those of you who have studied the life of Buddha and who know Buddha's teachings know that he said there are four great truths: there is sorrow; there is a cause of sorrow; sorrow can be removed; and there is a way by which it can be removed. He claimed that these truths had been revealed to him, and the profundity of his finding is proved by the tremendous effect that he and his teachings had on mankind. He went to the very root of suffering.

In our own times, we see a similar thing has happened in the life of another man born in India. This time, born in what was then the most modern city of that country. He could not be called properly an orthodox Hindu, because he was well

9 *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*, 8th ed (Calcutta Advaita Ashrama, 1991), 252

10 *Vivekachûdâmani*, 37

trained in Western culture. Being a graduate of the Calcutta University, he had studied Western philosophy, literature, history—everything. And yet he was a Hindu of the Hindus, because he not only studied Hindu literature and philosophy, he practised all the religious and spiritual things that make a Hindu a true Hindu. Without spiritual culture a Hindu is a mockery; he mocks his own ancestry, he mocks his own reality. So Swami Vivekananda was a combination of both East and West, and those who knew him could not but feel that if there is to be a true cosmopolitan, a true universal man, he was that man. In his mind there was no barrier to understanding truth in whatever form. And so there was the extraordinary fact that every person found him the ideal person; everyone found in him something which would stimulate the best in himself or herself. So we feel that it is not just vain talk when we say that he, Swami Vivekananda, is the true example of the modern man.

The modern man (using the word *man*, of course, in a generic sense) is going through many changes, but there are certain things that I think are essential to him. One is his regard for truth: he will follow truth wherever it leads; you cannot circumscribe truth anymore. Another is that he is bound to be universal, because he will not say, 'I won't study anything in China; I shall keep that out.' He will study everything. He will go to Africa, he will go to Asia, he will go to Europe; he will go wherever he can and study everything. So he or she is bound to become universal. If you tell him that life is a denial, that the world is false, unreal, that it is a vicious, evil thing, that he should give it up—no! It is *iti, iti*; it is not *neti, neti*—it is 'this, this,' not 'not this, not this.' He wants to accept all aspects of reality. To tell him, 'Give up this, deny this,'—no! that won't weigh with him at all; he won't accept it. He has to have everything. Further, he wants to see men and women rise to the greatest glory they can. He will even forget God in order to raise human beings. You cannot deny that these are some of the essential motives in the heart of the modern man.

But modern man is confused; he doesn't know how to combine all these things. If he takes

all that is of life, he finds there is a lot that is evil, and he fights against it, yet he cannot escape the prodding of the time spirit; he goes after truth or knowledge or reason, and then he finds he cannot believe in religion, because much of religion seems irrational. So he is full of conflicts, full of contradictions. Vedantins say that this is because he has not stabilized himself where he really exists; he has not found what is really motivating him. There was a book written some years ago by Dr. Carl Jung, the psychologist. He called it *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Yes, modern man is trying to find something stable and permanent deep within himself; he is trying to find the core of his own being, from which all other things come. Finding that, he will become stabilized, self-assured.

Vedantins would just add that man needn't 'search' for a soul; he IS the soul. He has just to be calm and appraise himself. It is as though everybody were talking loudly in the room, and I say, 'Just stop, stop! Be quiet! There's something beautiful here. Don't you hear that beautiful music?' No one hears it; but when they become quiet, they begin to hear strains of that distant music. Man has just to be quiet; when the clamour of his mind is stilled, then he can hear the beautiful music of his own soul. Once he has heard that music, he will follow it until he has come to its source; he will find that he is the Spirit. And once he has glimpsed his own true Self, the Spirit, and thereby recognizes that everyone is the Spirit and that the Spirit is in no way different from God, the Divine Spirit, that everything *is* the Divine Spirit, then all his conflicting drives will fall into a pattern of beautiful harmony. The moment that happens, modern man, men and women together will sing in the loudest voice they can this one great song of discovery! That will be the greatest discovery of modern times, and we are waiting for it. When it happens I am sure that Swami Vivekananda, wherever he may be, will hear this glorious song of discovery, and if anyone is happy, he will be the happiest of all. ■

