

# SWAMI VIVEKANANDA : THE SPIRITUAL TEACHER OF MODERN INDIA

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Swami Vivekananda came in the unbroken line of spiritual teachers from the Vedic period to the modern age. It is they who imparted the energy and direction peculiar to Indian culture—its deep spirituality. It is because they came age after age that our nation is still alive, in spite of invasions, subjections, humiliations, and devastations, a fraction of which has destroyed many a nation and many a culture. But we still exist, not only exist, but are strong and vital, thanks to the periodic touch of these master-minds. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda brought youthfulness to the age-old Indian cultural experiment. By the end of the eighteenth century, India had become old and effete, broken and dispirited; but with the touch of Swami Vivekananda, old India became young once again. In the language of the late Dr. Brojendra Nath Seal, 'India is ever-aging but never old'. At each critical period in our history, a great man has appeared and imparted a new energy and vigour to the nation, enabling it to become young again. This is the historic and cultural significance of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's statement in the *Gītā*: '*Sambhāvāmi yuge yuge—I shall be born again and again.*' And this was what happened in India at the end of the last century. Through the touch of Swami Vivekananda, the Indian nation became youthful. And according to Indian philosophy, he who imparts youthfulness, vigour, and clarity of vision to a man or to a nation is the *guru* of that man or that nation. In this sense, the Swami was really the Rāṣṭraguru and also something more. He did the same service to the West as well. Through such service in both the hemispheres,

he united humanity through the thread of divinity within all men and women. And he achieved this stupendous task within a brief span of ten years in his short thirty-nine years, five months, and eighteen days of earthly life. He became a bridge between the East and the West, the old and the new.

Swami Vivekananda was, in every sense of the term, a world spiritual teacher. All his work in the East or the West was to summon men and women to their spiritual heritage. In line with the great sages and seers of this country, Swamiji taught men and women to realize the Divine that is embodied in man. All his activities in every part of the country and abroad have this one single objective. Whether he spoke of India's poverty, backwardness, untouchability, and the need for her industrial development, or whether he spoke in the West about the need to practise toleration in matters of religion, his primary object was to give to man the priceless gift of *ātma-jñāna*, Self-knowledge, to make men realize the Ātman, the Divine that is within. The way he developed a comprehensive spirituality out of this great Vedāntic idea is something unique.

Religion has come to mean something very narrow in recent times. But when we speak of religion in connection with Swami Vivekananda, there is nothing narrow or exclusive about it, nothing negative about it; it is pure spirituality. So far as India is concerned, this has been the teaching of her great masters, the sages of the Upaniṣads and the teacher of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. They taught us to view religion as a matter of *anubhava* or spiritual realization. 'Religion is being and becoming',

said Swami Vivekananda. It does not consist in doctrines and creeds, dogmas and churches and temples, but it consists in a struggle to realize the Divine within us. It is from this point of view that he defines religion as the 'manifestation of the divinity already in man'. According to him, the destruction of bondage, external as well as internal, constitutes the whole scope of religion, and he expounds this idea in all his lectures and discourses.

To bring humanity to an awareness of this great fact was the main work of Swami Vivekananda in the East and the West. This is the work of true religion. It was done by the great sages of the Upaniṣads, by Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa, by Buddha, by Śaṅkara, and by the large galaxy of reformers of the Middle Ages, in the past, and by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, in our time. It is this role of a spiritual teacher that shone through him when he addressed the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893; he reminded that august audience that man is not a sinner, that he is not a creature of circumstances, but that he is a spark of the Divine. This is the saving message of Indian wisdom. And so, while addressing the whole of modern humanity through that Parliament, he said: 'Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name—heirs of immortal bliss. Yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye, divinities on earth—sinners! It is a sin to call a man so: it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.'

Therefore, as already said, it was this work of awakening of the human spirit from the sleep of ignorance and delusion that Swamiji accomplished in the East and the West. But the method he adopted to achieve this end was different in the two hemispheres. In India, he saw that the work of awakening was needed

primarily in the socio-political field. He saw that the Indian man and woman had to be educated into the values of citizenship, of social awareness, into the capacities for practical efficiency and organized co-operative efforts. The creation of such free and self-disciplined citizens was the aim of his message of practical Vedānta. Virtues and graces so gained alone can become the basis of the highest spiritual development of man. Without this moral basis, religion becomes cheap, and spirituality a sham. So, when he spoke of religion in India, he used a beautiful expression to characterize its content; he called it 'man-making religion'. Similarly, he called his scheme of education for India 'man-making education'. He wanted to make men of us; he saw that the masses of India had not achieved the full glory of human beings; if the Indian people cannot co-operate with each other, if they cannot help each other, if they cannot try to bring out the best from each other, how can they achieve the glory of human existence? Manliness connotes the virtues of strength, freedom, mutual help and appreciation, and equality. Man-making education and man-making religion are meant to create a pattern of excellence in the society as well as within its individual members. The concept of man and of his excellence in Swami Vivekananda's thought is the most progressive among such concepts today.

This was a man-making message; it combines man-making religion with man-making education. The Swami called it 'Practical Vedānta'. Vedānta we have in our books; Vedānta we have seen in the lives of the great sages and saints of our country; but Vedānta as a sheet-anchor of nation-building, of a dynamic social policy, by which the masses become transformed into dynamic centres of all-round social development—this type of practical application of Vedānta we had never witnessed in our country. It was the supreme glory of Swami Vivekananda that he broadcasted the life-giving message of Vedānta to one and all.

'These conceptions of the Vedānta must come out,' he said, 'must remain not only in the forest, not only in the cave, but they must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying. They call to every man, woman, and child, whatever be their occupation, wherever they may be. If the fisherman thinks he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman; if the student thinks he is the Spirit, he will be a better student; if the lawyer thinks he is the Spirit, he will be a better lawyer, and so on. If you teach Vedānta to the fisherman, he will say, "I am as good a man as you, I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I have the same God in me, as you have in you". And that is what we want, no privilege for anyone, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the Divine is within, and everyone will work out his own salvation.'

This is the universal message of Vedānta which Swami Vivekananda proclaimed from the house-tops in the East and the West. In this great message, Swamiji emphasized two values, which he considered the central values of Indian culture and civilization. And they are *tyāga*, renunciation, and *sevā*, service. He gave a compressed statement of the central values of Indian culture when he said: 'Renunciation and service are the twin ideals of India. Intensify her in those channels, the rest will take care of itself.'

For the past fifteen years, we have been enjoying political freedom. Can we say good-bye to these ideals today? Can the nation achieve greatness and glory without continuous inspiration provided by the values of renunciation and service? But it looks as if we as a people have begun to feel that renunciation and service were necessary only in the context of struggle for political freedom; but now that freedom is achieved, we can do without them. This grievously wrong con-

clusion is our biggest national problem today. If all the problems that have been accumulating around us for the last fifteen years are analysed closely, it will be revealed that the root of all our troubles is the fading of this spirit of renunciation and service in post-independence India. Today, we need to inspire ourselves with this ideal once again. We cannot build up this great country, we cannot destroy its backwardness, and make a truly progressive state, we cannot establish that hegemony of man over the environment, which is the meaning of freedom, until our people are once again inspired by this vision of renunciation and service. The best of human achievements proceed from us when we least think of ourselves. 'Not I but thou' is always the law of man's higher life. 'He that findeth his life shall lose it,' says Jesus, 'and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.' This has been the teaching of the great masters, both in the East and the West. Today, the country needs the ministrations of the spirit of Swami Vivekananda. Our national development plans, our various community projects, our every department of national activity, needs men and women inspired by the vision, not of their own little selves, but of the larger self of society. We have to learn to live and act in a national development awareness and perspective.

Let the people of India today be inspired by this message of renunciation—renunciation of the little self, manifestation of the higher Self, and its positive expression of service. Renounce the *kaccā* ego, and manifest the *pukkā* ego, as Sri Ramakrishna expresses it. Then only can a man establish harmony with his fellowmen and with the rest of creation; it alone enables a man to co-operate with others and work for general welfare. This alone makes possible national solidarity and integration. National life, intensified by these two forces, will express the purest and the best in its heritage; and they will stand guarantee to the continued unity and strength of the nation.