

The Four Visions of the Buddha and Vivekananda

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Gautama's Visions

When Gautama Siddhartha saw the four realities of life or 'visions'—of a sick man, an old man, a dead body, and a monk—he knew he had a message to give to the world.

The *first* vision of the sick man showed the Buddha that life was, is, and will be suffering: he envisioned the first of the four great noble truths (*ârya satya*) that existence is suffering (*duhkha*).

When he saw the *second* vision, of the diseased individual, Gautama envisioned the second truth, of the origin of suffering in life (*samudaya*). Every disease has a cause; so cause brings its own effect (*pratitya samutpâda*). So Siddhartha decided that suffering has its origin somewhere and that somewhere is the mind.

The *third* vision, of a dead body, made him envision the third great noble truth, that suffering can come to an end (*nirodha*), even as he clearly knew that the cause and effect chain does not end with death. He never gave up the idea of rebirth in spite of insisting upon the idea of impermanence (*kshanikatvam*) of everything.

Then came before Gautama the *fourth* and last vision: that of a monk. When Gautama Siddhartha saw the monk, he envisioned the fourth and final *ârya satya*: that suffering can be removed by a systematic way of practice (*mârگا*). So he left his palace for good, the

Buddha was born and, subsequently, his great path.

The Buddha had a message—for the East.

Vivekananda's Visions

Similar to the Buddha, Vivekananda had four great visions, and great noble truths (*ârya satya*) born out of it. Vivekananda's visions were about India, his motherland, 'the queen of his adoration.'

The *first* of the visions was that of India's state of affairs—impoverished, enslaved and diseased. He then envisioned the first of the noble truths: 'India shall be raised.'¹

This brought to Vivekananda's mind the *second* of the noble truths: that India shall be raised

not with the power of the flesh, but by the power of the Spirit; not with the flag of destruction, but with the flag of peace and love.²

On the last piece of rock at Kanyakumari, Vivekananda envisioned the *third* noble truth then, that India shall be raised: 'by the power of the begging bowl,' 'the garb of the Sannyasin,' as he put it. The question was, why should India be raised at all? What could a misery-stricken, poor, helpless, and suffering India do even if it was raised?

When Vivekananda stood at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, he envisioned the *fourth* noble truth:



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‘The world is waiting for the spiritual treasures of India.’

In his own words:

For a complete civilisation the world is waiting, waiting for the treasures to come out of India, waiting for the marvellous spiritual inheritance of that race, which, through decades of degradation and misery, the nation has still clutched to her breast. The world is waiting for that treasure; little do you know how much of hunger and of thirst there is outside of India for these wonderful treasures of our forefathers. We talk here, we quarrel with each other, we laugh at and we ridicule everything sacred, till it has become almost a national vice to ridicule everything holy. Little do we understand the heart-pangs of millions waiting outside the walls, stretching forth their hands for a little sip of that nectar which our forefathers have preserved in this land of India.³

Thus, he set forth to found the Order of Ramakrishna, an organization which has already influenced India and the rest of the world.

His Message to the ‘West’

And, like Buddha, Vivekananda had a message—to the West.

Like the Buddha, who gave to the world the noble eightfold path by undergoing inordinate suffering, all the incarnations have had to suffer intensely to bring light to the world. Rama, Krishna, Jesus, Chaitanya, Ramakrishna—all had to endure inordinate suffering in order to teach humanity. They need not have to be born, but they take birth. They do not have any duties to perform, but they work incessantly to remove ignorance and bring Light. Krishna says in the *Gita* [3.22] that in the three worlds there is no duty for the incarnation to perform. There appears to be a ‘policy’, however, with the incarnations: they

don’t come to break but to make. They respect societal values that are current during their times, and enrich humanity in every walk of life—art, culture, literature, science and, of course, spirituality. These incarnations, then, are the archetypes; they are the role models for us to follow, not only for spiritual development, but also to become noble citizens. Indeed, whatever an incarnation does is for the good of humanity.

Vivekananda’s Contribution

While the Buddha taught the world that physical life is suffering that can be overcome, and Jesus taught that loving the neighbours as oneself is the ideal, Krishna taught that to work incessantly without egocentric motives until knowledge awakens in the heart is the ideal. Still something more was needed for modern times, and that was left for Vivekananda to contribute. To put in Nivedita’s words, there was the need of a philosophy which would have

no distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.⁴

It is therefore that Swami Vivekananda is called a path finder for the modern age. He himself declared, he had a message to the ‘West’ even as the Buddha had a message to the ‘East’.⁵ By West, he meant the whole ultra-modern society. Wrote Sister Nivedita,

It is this which adds its crowning significance to our Master’s [i.e., Vivekananda’s] life, for here he becomes the meeting-point, not only of East and West, but also of past and future.⁶

Like a true prophet, Vivekananda considered all aspects of life, and contributed to every single aspect. The prophet lifts society at all levels. He not only brought about a

radical change in the spiritual development of countless human beings all over the globe, but also gave a moral boost to society as a whole. To know what exactly Vivekananda's contribution was to the all-important subject of enlightened citizenship, we should study the principles of enlightened citizenship.

Vedanta and Enlightened Citizenship

Much has been written, and many great personalities have dedicated their lives, to the subject of enlightened citizenship. Discerning what these scholars have to say about the ideals of enlightened citizenship with a few of Vivekananda's teachings, we can see what Swami Vivekananda had to contribute towards this ideal. There are four important ideals and needs of an enlightened citizen. One might look at these four ideas as derivatives of his four noble truths:

1. The 'You first' principle
2. Respect for others
3. The importance of education
4. Service as a way of life

All these four ideas are interlinked

1. *The 'You first' principle:* A truly enlightened citizen thinks of the others first—'yourself first' is his attitude. This means a lot to society—evil practices will end, corruption will end, quarrels will end, prices will be low, there will be plenty, there will be happiness. To say 'you first, myself last' means that one has to respect others.

2. *Respect for others:* Respect, however, does not mean merely saluting the other. It means upholding the dignity of the individual, irrespective of the work, status in life, and so on.

In order, however, to have such respect, we need proper education. Knowledge is the

only means of instilling respect and dignity. Knowledge comes through right education. This is where Vedantic education comes in. No other knowledge teaches us the dignity of the Spirit as Vedanta does.

One may follow any prophet or any saint that one likes, but the idea that Vedanta upholds strongly is that of the potential divinity of the soul. We are all divine. And this divinity should be manifested.

3. *The Importance of education:* According to Swami Vivekananda, education is the manifestation of the perfection already in us. We are perfect, and we should manifest this innate perfection. This is right knowledge. By Vedanta, no particular sect or group is meant. Vedanta teaches us that we are one even at the gross level, because we are made of the same five elements. At the subtle level, we are essentially one, because we are all made of the same five subtle elements, the *tanmâtras*. We are one and the same at the spiritual level, simply because infinity cannot be two. So we are one. In order to be true citizens of society in modern times, this Vedantic philosophy, as envisaged by Swami Vivekananda, is the hope. *Shraddhâ* or faith in the divinity of ourselves is an essential point. When we have faith in our higher Self, we begin to act. To act means to try to manifest this innate potentiality.

4. *Service as a way of life:* An enlightened citizen means a person willing to serve. This brings the ideal of karma yoga—the fourth point of service—to the forefront. The best contribution of Swami Vivekananda to the present and future world is his karma yoga. Karma yoga is a unique remedy which betters all aspects of life in one stroke. How can one be religious without having faith in God, is the question of Semitic religions. But Vivekananda declared that having faith in oneself is

sufficient to be religious and spiritual. With this 'active faith' in oneself, we serve others, with respect and dignity. And thus society moves forward. Swami Vivekananda remarked:

That society is the greatest, where the highest truths become practical. That is my opinion; and if society is not fit for the highest truths, make it so; and the sooner, the better.⁷

When there is faith in ourselves, we shall have faith in others too—in their divinity, in their potentialities, in their virtues. Weakness and errors are only superimpositions. So, an enlightened citizen is a true Vedantist—without boundaries, without walls, without confinements. He is beyond faiths and groups, beyond countries and cultures; he is universal. He is one with the universe. This, in fact, was Vivekananda's declaration too when he said:

Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.⁸

What is of utmost importance is to manifest our innate divinity not by escaping from society, but by involving oneself selflessly in it.

Conclusion

Practising the above ideals would take the enlightened citizen on the path of spirituality. An enlightened citizen, who forgets religious barricades and works for the well-being of one and all, knowing the Vedantic truth of the Omnipresence of the Self, is already spiritual. His life is a spiritual life.

What should we do to be enlightened citizens? It can be declared safely, nobody has proclaimed the divinity and dignity of the human soul like Swami Vivekananda. He is unique in this respect. To love India, or expand our love to the whole world, we must love Vivekananda. Just having *shraddhâ* or 'active faith' in his words that we are potential divinities is enough to do the miracle. Let us take care of our essential divinity and the rest takes care of itself. To take care of our innate divinity, all we have to do is live an intense life—concentrate more, work more, think more profoundly, and if we have faith in God, pray more.

This, in fact, is the essence of all *ârya satyas* or noble truths which have their origin in the great visions of the great minds. □

References

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| 1. CW, 4: 352. | 2. CW, 4: 352 | 3. CW, 3: 317 | 4. Sister Nivedita's Introduction to the <i>Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda</i> , vol. 1: xv |
| | | 5. CW, 5: 314 | 6. CW, 1: xv |
| | | | 7. CW, 2: 85 |
| | | | 8. CW, 1: 124 |

India's Timeless Wisdom

आयुषः खण्डमादाय रविरस्तमयं गतः ।
अहन्यहनिबोद्धव्यं किमेतत्सुकृतंकृतम् ॥

'Know that, everyday, the sun rises and sets and takes away along with him daily a portion of your life and therefore do good actions, ever and anon.'

—A Traditional Saying