

Swami Vivekananda's Life & Message

SWAMI GAHANANANDA

TODAY we have gathered here to pay homage to one of the greatest men ever born on earth. Persons like Swami Vivekananda appear in the world only once in a few centuries. Swami Abhedananda, another great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, said about Swamiji:

Such a preacher of Truth occasionally appears like a gigantic comet above the horizon, dazzling the eyes and filling the hearts of ordinary mortals with wonder and admiration, and silently passes away into the invisible and unknown realm of the universe. The late Swami Vivekananda was one of those great comets who appeared in the spiritual firmament once perhaps after several centuries.

Sri Ramakrishna himself had the highest estimate of Swami Vivekananda's greatness. He placed his teenage disciple far above all his other disciples and the great men of his day. On some occasions the Master spoke of his great disciple as an Incarnation of Śiva, and on some other occasions as one of the seven immortal sages who dwell in higher worlds for the good of mankind. Even ordinary people like us can see that Swami Vivekananda achieved so much in such a short period of his life, and his message is so vast and complex, that we can understand his life and message only superficially or partially.

Five days ago, on these premises I had the privilege of speaking on Sri Ramakrishna.¹ These two personalities—Sri

Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda—are inseparable. In this connection I would like to quote the words of Bipin Chandra Pal, a great orator and prominent figure in India's freedom struggle:

Vivekananda does not stand alone. He is indissolubly bound up with his Master Paramahansa Ramakrishna. ...The modern man can only understand Paramahansa in and through Vivekananda, and Vivekananda can be understood only in the light of the life of his Master.

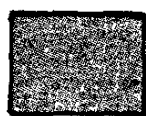
Bipin Chandra Pal continues in this way and adds:

Paramahansa Ramakrishna, like Jesus Christ, needed an interpreter to explain him and deliver his message to his Age. Jesus found such an interpreter in St. Paul; Ramakrishna found him in Vivekananda.

Many of you may be familiar with the life of Swami Vivekananda. I would like to place before you only a very brief outline of Swamiji's life and message.

Swami Vivekananda was known in his premonastic life as Narendranath Datta. He was born on 12th January 1863 in a well-to-do family in Calcutta. As a boy he was precocious and acquired proficiency in music and great learning even before his graduation. It was when he was eighteen years old that he met Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, where the Master was staying. From his Master, Narendranath learned that religion is not merely a matter of faith or book-learning but of direct experience. Under Sri Ramakrishna's

1. The text of this speech was published in the March 1992 edition of this journal.—Ed.



Text of the speech given at Ramakrishna Mission, Colombo (Sri Lanka), on 19 January 1992 by Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, now a Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Order. □

guidance, he practised intense spiritual disciplines and, at the age of twenty-four, attained the highest form of spiritual experience known as *nirvikalpa samadhi*, in which the individual self disappears in the infinite Supreme Self. Soon after this, in 1886 Sri Ramakrishna left the physical body. Before his passing away he had already trained a band of young disciples and given their charge to Narendra. After the Master's passing away, these young disciples took the formal ordination of *sannyasa* and formed a monastic brotherhood which later on came to be known as the Ramakrishna Math. Narendranath now became Swami Vivekananda.

The life of Swami Vivekananda from now onwards may be divided into three parts. The first part consists of seven years. During this period his time was spent either in practising intense spiritual disciplines or in wandering all over India as a mendicant monk. During these wanderings he was deeply moved by the utter poverty and backwardness of the hapless masses. And he began to think deeply how the downtrodden millions could be uplifted. He found the answer probably at Kanyakumari. The answer was that he would spread Indian spirituality in the West which needed it and, in return, he would get the help of Western people for uplifting the poor. It was with this idea that Swami Vivekananda set sail for the United States of America in 1893.

In September that year there was the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago and Swami Vivekananda represented Hinduism in it. After that he spent four years travelling in different parts of USA and visiting London twice. These four years constitute the second period of Swamiji's creative life. During this period a number of Western people gathered around him either as disciples or as admirers.

The remaining five and a half years form the third part of Swami Vivekananda's life. His main activities during this period were: awakening the collective consciousness of Indian people through the series of lectures delivered from Colombo to Almora; founding the Ramakrishna Mission and organizing relief operations; establishment of Ramakrishna monasticism on a firm foundation at the newly acquired site now known as Belur Math. On the fourth of July 1902 Swami Vivekananda gave up his body at the age of 39½ years. Speaking about the early death of Swamiji, Swami Abhedananda remarked:

One ordinary human body was not enough, nor twenty, nor a hundred, for such tremendous energy. Such intense intellect and spirituality would soon dissolve the granite foundation stones.

Swami Vivekananda burst upon the forum of the world like a mighty avalanche at the age of thirty. For nine and a half years he worked incessantly like a whirlwind showering countless blessings upon humanity, and then disappeared from mortal vision like the golden rays of the setting sun. His achievements during this short period were so varied and stupendous that it is not possible to comprehend them all or give even a brief account of them here. I can only mention that the work and achievements of Swami Vivekananda may be divided into four categories: The work he did for his Master Sri Ramakrishna, his work for Hinduism, his work for India, and his contributions to world thought and culture.

When we study the life of Swami Vivekananda, three aspects of his personality strike us as extraordinary. The first aspect is his extraordinary purity and holiness. One of the characteristics of a *sthitaprajña* or illumined soul mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita* is that he moves about freely among the objects of senses

without getting affected by them. Swami Vivekananda is one of the best examples of this fact. When he was in the West, rich and cultured homes were open to him. He could live in some of them like a member of the family because of his extraordinary purity. All those who knew him personally bore testimony to this. Whether he was in India or in the West, he lived like a true sannyasin.

The second striking feature of his personality is his great compassion for the poor and suffering. Never since Buddha and Christ has the world seen so compassionate a person as Swami Vivekananda. Dr. Logan, who was the President of the Vedanta Society of San Francisco and knew Swamiji intimately, has said that Swamiji's very form and every mood were those of tender compassion and sympathy. On the first night of his appearance at the Chicago Parliament of Religions he could not sleep because of his intense sorrow for the condition of the poverty-stricken people in India. He lay on the bare floor weeping and cried out:

O Mother, what do I care for name and fame when my motherland remains sunk in utmost poverty! Who will raise the masses in India? Who will give them bread? Show me, O Mother, how I can help them.

The third striking feature of Swami Vivekananda's personality is the extraordinary power of intuition and capacities of the intellect that he possessed. Like the great teacher Sankaracharya, Swamiji grasped the essence of all the scriptures of India and reinterpreted them to suit the needs of the modern man. He was a seer who could foresee the future destiny of man. He himself said that he had given enough for the next thousand years. Swamiji attempted the greatest philosophical synthesis that the world has ever seen. He tried to synthesize

all that is best in the Eastern and the Western thought and in the ancient and the modern thought. Within Hinduism itself he effected a vast harmony. He was the first teacher to bring out the common bases of Hinduism and give this religion the distinct profile that it now has. He harmonized the four Yogas, the three stages of spiritual experience known as dualism, qualified monism and non-dualism, and broke down the distinction between the sacred and the secular. The result of all this is a great message for the modern world.

Swamiji's message has two aspects: one meant for India and the other meant for the West. In India the main problem was the uplift of the poor masses and so he emphasized that in his message. In the West the problems were centred on the limitations of human existence. These problems included loss of faith in God, meaninglessness of life, loneliness, erosion of the bases of morality, lack of peace, and so on.

The solution to all these problems of the East and the West Swamiji found in the ancient system of thought in India known as Vedanta. The ancient scriptures of India known as the Vedas consist of three parts. The last part known as the Upanishads contain the fundamental truths of Reality which are universally valid. The sum total of these truths is known as Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda saw that these truths contained tremendous power to transform man's basic attitudes and, if applied in practical life, can solve the problems of man. This application of ancient spiritual truths to solve the problems of the modern world is what Swamiji called 'Practical Vedanta.' Just as science deals with the truths of the physical world, so also Vedanta deals with the truths of the spiritual world.

This does not, however, imply that

spiritual truths were discovered only in India. Some of the spiritual truths were known in other cultures also. But in Vedanta these truths attain their fullness and clear and precise expression. That is why Swamiji preferred to call his message 'Vedanta.'

But in India these universal truths had remained in the possession of a few privileged people. One of the great achievements of Swami Vivekananda was to break the barriers and make the truths available to all people without any distinction of caste, creed or nationality. Regarding this work of Swami Vivekananda, his famous British disciple Sister Nivedita wrote:

The truths he preached would have been as true, had he never been born... [But] had he not lived, texts that today will carry the bread of life to thousands might have remained the obscure disputes of scholars.

It is to spread these universal truths for the welfare of mankind that the Ramakrishna Mission has opened Centres in different parts of the world. The Ramakrishna Mission is not a missionary organization. We do not want to convert people from their traditional faith. We just allow the Truth to speak for itself. We open Centres solely at the instance of the local people.

I mentioned that Vedanta consists of universal truths. What are these truths? It is about some of the main truths and their practical application in life that I wish to speak a little here.

The first and foremost truth that Vedanta teaches is about the ultimate Reality. Vedanta holds that the external universe is not what it appears to be. This is of course a fact accepted by modern science also. According to Vedanta, behind the apparent universe, there is the ultimate Reality known as Brahman. This Reality is of the nature of consciousness. *Prajñānam brahma*, 'Brahman is consciousness'—this

is one of the most famous statements in Vedanta. What does this mean? It means that consciousness is the primary factor in the universe, matter is derived from it, and so matter is only a secondary factor. In Vedanta, the mind is also regarded as matter—subtle matter. The ultimate Reality known as Brahman is the source of everything—the mind and all physical objects.

You may ask, how do you know this? How do you know that Brahman is the ultimate Reality? In science a fundamental principle is that a statement can be regarded as true only if it is verified or proved. Can this verifiability principle be applied to the knowledge of Brahman also? This question was raised by Swami Vivekananda himself. To quote his words:

Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason, through which every other science justifies itself? Are the same methods of investigation which we apply to science and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of religion? In my opinion this must be so, and I am also of the opinion that the sooner it is done, the better.

When Swamiji made this statement, Western psychology was in its infancy. But now with the help of EEG (electro-encephalogram), biofeedback and innovative experiments, modern psychologists are able to verify many truths of the spiritual world or, to use a current term, the transpersonal world. Similarly, with the help of meditation and intuition, the existence of the ultimate Reality called Brahman can be verified through direct experience or realization. This doctrine of direct experience is the second fundamental concept of Vedanta.

How the ultimate Reality can be directly experienced was thoroughly investigated in ancient India. Several pathways were discovered. These paths came to be called Yogas. All of you may have heard the

word 'Yoga'. In popular usage Yoga refers to certain bodily postures or exercises. But that is not what Yoga really means. The root meaning of Yoga is either 'concentration' or 'union'. However, what Yoga really means is transformation of consciousness. In recent years, certain drugs are being used to bring about what are called 'altered states of consciousness.' Drug-abuse has become a serious problem in many parts of the world. But drugs produce only hallucinations, not transformation of consciousness. They only weaken the mind and bring about the person's ruin. That is not Yoga. Yoga is based on purification of mind, strengthening of will, love, and long practice.

There are four main Yogas: Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Karma Yoga. Each Yoga represents one particular way of transforming consciousness. In Jnana Yoga transformation of consciousness is effected through Self-knowledge. In Bhakti Yoga the transformation is brought about through devotion. In Raja Yoga it is brought about through meditation. In Karma Yoga transformation of consciousness takes place through selfless work. You will find excellent descriptions of these Yogas in Swami Vivekananda's works.

Here I wish to tell you something about Jnana Yoga. It constitutes the main foundation of Vedanta. The central idea in Jnana Yoga is that the individual self or soul known as the Ātman is one with the ultimate Reality known as Brahman. The Upanishads declare: *Ayam ātmā brahma*. 'This Ātman is Brahman.' This equation is the basis of Jnana Yoga. What this means is, by knowing the Ātman, the entire Reality can be known.

You may ask, what use has this knowledge for the modern man? I would answer, Self-knowledge has immense practical use, especially for the modern

man. Modern man's life has become extremely complex. Industrialization and urbanization have disturbed established patterns of social life. Family ties are breaking up. Economic competition, unlimited pleasure-seeking, and the spread of mass media have filled modern man's life with useless activities and keep his mind always restless. These and various other factors have made life full of stress. The alarming increase of neuroses and various psychosomatic diseases such as high blood pressure, arthritis and peptic ulcer, and susceptibility to diabetes and cancer is all believed to be reactions to stress. No doubt, modern psychologists have tremendously increased man's knowledge of himself, especially of the workings of the unconscious parts of the mind. Modern psychology has given man a kind of lower self-knowledge. But it has not solved his basic problems; it has not brought him lasting peace or fulfilment. Why? Because it does not touch the core of personality. Modern psychology has not discovered the true nature of man, his true Self. Here comes the importance of Vedanta.

Vedanta goes deeper. Vedanta says, what we refer to as 'I' is only the false self or ego. Behind it there stands the self-luminous Ātman which is the source of all knowledge and power. But forgetting this fact, we seek knowledge and power outside. The Ātman is also the source of all happiness; but forgetting this fact, we seek pleasure in external objects. It is man's alienation from his true Self that is the cause of all psychological problems of man. The Ātman is the true nature of man, and unless he realizes it, he can never attain lasting peace or fulfilment.

What the modern man needs most is a centre of peace within him. He needs an ego-free, trouble-free area within, from where he can understand his problems,

take correct decision, and deal with courage and strength the various forces acting upon him. For this he needs higher Self-knowledge. He has to seek and realize his true Self, the Ātman. This knowledge will give him great inner power, self-control and peace. About this Swami Vivekananda said,

Teach yourselves, teach everyone, his real nature; call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakens. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.

Swami Vivekananda did not regard man as a born sinner. He did not like the very word 'sin'. He preferred the word 'error'. Yes, man may err, he may commit mistakes. But he can correct himself, he can rectify his mistakes through true knowledge. True knowledge means higher Self-knowledge. Through higher Self-knowledge man overcomes his defects, his limitations, and leads a pure and peaceful life. This is the essential teaching of Vedanta.

Here you may ask, does not this philosophy foster selfishness and self-centredness? The answer is that, on the contrary, Vedanta provides the only true basis for love and service. I should love my neighbour as myself because I and my neighbour are one in Spirit. In India the ideal of service had always been there, but it never found proper social expression until Swami Vivekananda came on the scene. Swamiji introduced the idea of doing social service in an organized way. He also gave a new turn to social service by equating service to man with worship of God. Swami Vivekananda said in one of his lectures:

This is the gist of all worship—to be pure and to do good to others. He who sees God in the poor, in the weak and in the diseased, really worships God

It is in this spirit of worship that all service activities of the Ramakrishna Mission are conducted.

Friends, I have placed before you three main concepts of Vedanta as interpreted by Swami Vivekananda. Now I would like to conclude my talk by mentioning the fourth main principle of Vedanta: the principle of harmony.

Harmony is what the world desperately needs now. We live in a world which is full of conflicts. Modern methods of transport, communication, business, and other factors have brought nations closer to one another than ever before. There is also enough land and enough food for all the people to live in contentment. And yet we find so much of conflict, unrest and violence everywhere in the name of nationality, race, religion, language etc. There may be compelling reasons for all these. But the basic cause is the absence of an all-inclusive, harmonizing view or philosophy of life acceptable to all. Vedanta provides at least the basis for such a universal philosophy of life, for Vedanta is based on universal principles such as the divinity of the soul and the unity of all life.

One of the tragedies of human life is that although religion is meant to unify people, all along human history religions have been the major cause of conflict and division. The time has now come for effecting the harmony of religions. This harmony has assumed greater reality with the coming of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna. Till now religious harmony has been effected on the principle of toleration. But Swami Vivekananda has pointed out that mere toleration is not enough. Real harmony can be brought about only by accepting some of the best elements of other religions. His earnest appeal in this regard will stir the soul of every man: