

THE MESSAGE OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA : A RETHINKING

BY SWAMI PAVITRANANDA

[Swami Pavitrananda, formerly an editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*, is at present the head of the Vedanta Society of New York. In this learned and thought-provoking article, he has clearly brought out the message that Swami Vivekananda has left for his own countrymen and for humanity at large.]

It is one hundred years since Swami Vivekananda was born, and it is sixty-one years since he passed away, leaving behind a great message and the example of a great life. The Swami, affectionately known as Swamiji by thousands of devotees, was a manifold personality—a spiritual giant, who, not satisfied with his own unfoldment, intensely strove for the good of all. He had a very compassionate heart which keenly felt for the suffering of the whole of humanity. He was a great monk who renounced everything, but his love for his motherland, India, did not leave him at any time. As such, he spoke for the salvation of India, for the removal of the misery of the world, and above all, how every human being could get the knowledge of his divinity. Swamiji's message was, therefore, not for one time, but for all times—not for one country, but for all countries, not for one aspect of human life, but for all aspects of human existence.

It is doubtful whether the world has seen a second soul like him who felt, thought, and worked so hard for the good of humanity. Swamiji had this great advantage—he lived in modern times when the world is being more and more knit together, when no country, nation, or man can live in proud or despised isolation. The one sure mark of a spiritual man is that his love embraces all, irrespective of colour, creed, and geographical area. Being a highly developed spiritual soul, Swami Vivekananda became identified with the whole world.

In previous eras, one's conception of the 'whole world' was limited; knowledge of one country about another was not so great. With the progress of science, time and space

have shrunk, and the horizon of human knowledge has widened more and more. Though Swamiji lived in the last century (having touched only the fringe of the present century), he had a clear glimpse of what was ahead for the world, and therefore, his thoughts and feelings were in terms of the problems with which we are faced today and which we will be facing tomorrow. During his lifetime, the pressing problems were of one kind. Though fundamental problems are always the same, our immediate problems are of a different kind. On the occasion of the birth centenary of Swami Vivekananda, we should attempt to discover how his living words relate to our present and future. In other words, we have to imagine what he would say to us today if we could hear his physical voice.

During his time, Swamiji found India under the yoke of foreign rule, a very sad victim of economic exploitation, losing faith in her own culture and civilization, her soul almost on the point of extinction, without any hope of regeneration, as it were. Nobody could imagine that India could ever be independent, even in the distant future. There was darkness all around. No ray of light was visible anywhere. Versed in Indian history and Sanskrit lore, three thousand years of India's past was with him a living reality before his very eyes, which could never be dimmed, though the existing condition of India was very abject. A man of God, religion with him was not a matter of aspiration or striving, but a realization, a direct experience. A disciple of Sri Ramakrishna who lived the harmony of all religions in his own life, it was spontaneous for Swamiji to see

the same basic truths in all religions. As a wandering monk he roamed over all India from the Himalayas to Kanya Kumari and saw the people—the high and the low, the rich and the poor, the so-called educated and the supposedly illiterate; he realized their strength and knew their weakness, but, above all, he was sorely moved by the poverty and misery of the masses. His compassionate heart bled for them. For a time, this suffering of the masses in India was the foremost thought in his mind. It is hardly any exaggeration to say that nobody knew India in the way Swami Vivekananda did. He was frankly proud of India's glorious past, he was sure of India's bright future, but the present condition of India made him miserable. He writhed in agony at the sight of the miseries of the people of India. In such a mood, he told his countrymen in the year 1897: 'For the next fifty years, this alone shall be our key-note—this, our great Mother India. Let all other vain gods disappear for that time from our minds. This is the only god that is awake. . . . All other gods are sleeping.'¹ Without depending on the foreign rulers, he exhorted the people to stir themselves to the task of removing poverty, spreading education, nullifying social injustices, and so on. Thus the patriot in Swami Vivekananda came out more prominent than the monk in him.

India was in an abject condition. When a country is in such misery, it becomes weak. Where could the needed strength be obtained? That was the crux of the problem. The solution only Swamiji could give. He said that the soul of India was religion, and if that could be touched, India would awaken. He made a clear distinction between social customs and real religion. Real religion is quite different from social usages and practices and malpractices. Make religion living, and India will rise—India that was like a sleeping leviathan will awaken. Religion is

in the very blood of the whole nation; everything should be done through the living inspiration of religion.

Later events have indicated how the great seer Swami Vivekananda was absolutely right. Within fifty years of his passing, India rose and shook off the foreign yoke, and in this matter religion played a great part. Truth and non-violence were the weapons with which Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the political movement, fought. Achieving independence in this way is a landmark in the history of India and a great event in the history of the world.

As regards the relation between India and the world, Swami Vivekananda was of the opinion that India will supply spiritual sustenance to the whole world. 'Shall India die?' wrote the Swami from America after having some personal experience of conditions in the West, 'Then from the world all spirituality will be extinct, all moral perfection will be extinct, all sweet-souled sympathy for religion will be extinct, all ideality will be extinct, and in its place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as the male and female deities, with money as its priest, fraud, force, and competition its ceremonies, and the human soul its sacrifice.'² Swamiji was quite definite on this point. He himself answered the sceptics when he said that this was not merely 'a manifestation of patriotic impulses'. The trend of events supported this assertion.

In India, a large number of persons are drawn to Swamiji because of his great love for his country. He is called a 'patriot-saint'. To them, his lectures from Colombo to Almora and his fiery letters asking people to dedicate their lives to the cause of India contain the essence of his message. To them, he was more an awakener of India than an awakener of souls.

To the devotees, followers, and admirers of Swamiji who belong to the countries outside India, the story is different. To them his

¹ *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 4th edition, Vol. III, p. 300.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 294.

message to India, however significant, is only a fraction of his whole message contained in his quite voluminous speeches and writings. They love, admire, and worship this great soul because of his spiritual message. They love the Swami Vivekananda who declared in a trumpet voice: 'Ye divinities on earth, it is a sin to call man a sinner.' 'Each soul is divine.' 'Man, the infinite dreamer, dreaming finite dreams.' They admire and turn to Swamiji, because his spiritual message of strength, hope, and courage opens up new vistas to them.

When Swami Vivekananda came to America, he was extremely happy to see the material prosperity of the country brought about by scientific development, the power of organization, and great opportunities for growth available to the poorest and the lowliest. Coming from India, he was greatly impressed by the freedom of movement, thought, and activities which the American women enjoyed. He said that America was a land of opportunity; it was a country for women and the masses. He thought America and India could benefit much from each other—India's spiritual idealism and America's material achievements, combined, would bring about a new era in the world.

America represented the height of material achievement in the Western countries. What was true of America was true, more or less, of almost all Western countries and civilizations. But it was not long before he was disillusioned about the real worth of material prosperity bereft of high spiritual purpose. The social life in the West was a peal of laughter on the surface, but underneath it was a long-drawn wail. He was extremely pained at this situation. 'The world is burning with great misery,' he wrote to one of his Western disciples from America, 'can you sleep?' 'Religions of the world have become lifeless mockeries. What the world wants is character. The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. That love will make every word tell like thunder-

bolt.'³ At another time, he said: 'The whole of the Western world rests on a volcano which may burst at any moment and destroy the whole world.' He uttered these words toward the close of the last century. At the present time, to our great dismay, we see how right he was, how every syllable of what he said was true.

What is the remedy against this impending catastrophe? His idea was that, unless men are of a better type and unless their lives are rooted in spiritual idealism, no amount of material achievement will bring peace and happiness to mankind or make the world safe for human habitation.

The value and utility of religion have been repeated time and again from the pulpit and the press till words like 'religion' and 'God' have become meaningless to many. Some will not even care to listen to such words. Swami Vivekananda, however, gave a new meaning and interpretation to religion. Whatever makes you strong is religion and whatever makes you weak is irreligion. Whatever makes you bold and courageous is religion, whatever makes you fear is irreligion. If there is any sin, it is only to fear. To fear is a great sin. These were not merely words of exhortation by a mob orator. The great Swami uttered them from his deep spiritual experience. Real religion is the realization of the Divine within by every soul. That Divinity is latent within each one of us; religious practices only bring it to our conscious level. When one has realized one's Divinity as a direct experience one has no fear of anything, not even death itself. Such a man will not compromise with truth for any self-interest or from any kind of fear. Such a man will not have any hatred or ill-feeling against anyone. He will not have any competition with any of his neighbours. Such a man has solved all his personal problems, reached the goal of life, and will bring peace, happiness, and strength to others. A handful

³ *Ibid.*, 2nd edition, Vol. VII, p. 432.

of such persons are sufficient to change the face of the earth.

In a ringing voice Swamiji said in a lecture in London: 'What the world wants today is twenty men and women who can dare to stand in the street yonder and say that they possess nothing but God. . . . If this is true, what else could matter? If it is not true, what do our lives matter?'⁴ In another context, he said: 'Let there be a dozen lion-souls in each country, lions who have broken their own bonds, who have touched the Infinite, whose soul is gone to Brahman, who care nothing for wealth, nor power, nor fame, and these will be enough to shake the world.'

Swamiji himself was a bright example of what he said. In the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, by one lecture he became world famous—literally overnight an unknown wandering monk became the man of the hour. What was it due to? It was neither his oft-mentioned prepossessing personal appearance, his admittedly great intellect and erudition, nor the combination of all these, which worked the miracle. It was his spiritual realization and knowledge of the Divine within which made him so powerful and irresistible.

'This infinite power of the Spirit, brought to bear upon matter, evolves material development; made to act upon thought, evolves intellectuality; and made to act upon Itself, makes of man a God', wrote the Swami in his reply to the Madras Address. He himself was the illustration of how one could become divine by knowing the Divine and wield overriding power and influence. His ideal was 'to preach unto mankind their divinity and teach them how to manifest that in every moment of their lives'. 'First let us be Gods and then help others to be Gods. "Be and make." Let this be our motto', he wrote. 'Say not man is a sinner. Tell him that he is a God. Even if there were a devil, it would be our duty to remember God always, and

not the devil. If the room is dark, the constant feeling and repeating of darkness will not take it away, but bring in the light. . . . Let us say, "We are" and "God is" and "We are God", "Śivo'ham, Śivo'ham", and march on. Not matter but Spirit. . . . This is the eternal truth the Śrutis preach. . . . Let the lion of Vedānta roar. . . . Throw the ideas broadcast, and let the result take care of itself.'⁵

Swami Vivekananda had the experience of what is called *samādhi* or the superconscious state. He had knowledge of the modern thoughts of the world. He translated the superconscious into the language of the moderns. As such, his words were both virile and modern. His rationalism was, at times, disturbing, if not frightening, to the orthodox and the conservative. But nobody could take offence at him. For he spoke the truth. No wonder he had a tremendous appeal to a large number of virile, thoughtful Western minds.

If Swamiji's words were fiery, his personality was almost overwhelming. Those who came into personal contact with him found in him a gentle soul whose calm influence soothed their lacerated hearts, brought peace to the chaotic condition of their minds, and gave strength to their drooping spirits. It seemed like magic, but he did not exercise any magic. He rejected psychic powers even when they were offered him by his own Master. He was so serene and had so much inner peace and strength that anybody coming within his orbit could not but feel their touch. Swami Vivekananda, who spoke of self-confidence as the first condition of growth in spiritual life, was a perfect example of self-effacement. One old lady who knew him, when asked what was her impression, said that she felt in his presence here was a man who had no self at all. Those who knew Swamiji invariably felt that he was much greater than his words,

⁴ Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him*, p. 26.

⁵ *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 4th edition, Vol. IV, p. 297.

however important and far-reaching in their influence they were.

This happened both in India and the West. Only in India, the immediate impact of his words and personality on large numbers of people was patriotic and humanitarian, bringing about a national awakening. His spiritual influence, though deeper and much more significant, intense, and concentrated, was limited to a fewer number of souls. In the West, however, his influence was purely spiritual. The actual needs in the two hemispheres were different.

In this nuclear era, when the very feeling of distance is fading away, an altogether new situation has arisen. A statement like 'India and Abroad' no longer holds true. No country is separate from another, however distant they were before. The time has, therefore, come when we should study the message of Swamiji not in terms of India and outside India, or the East and the West, but in relation to the world as a whole. The treasures of the East are the treasures of the West, the power of the West is the power of the East. It is not communism. It is common sense. We live together, or we die together, *literally*. No one can help it.

In the West, Swamiji spoke mainly of spiritual problems, whereas the same message in India was coloured with the thought of her practical needs. Nevertheless, his admirers and followers all the world over look to their counterparts in India for help and guidance, because the message originated in India, and they think the message in its pristine purity and strength will be found only in India. As such, it is a tremendous responsibility on his followers in India—monastic and lay. The message of a great spiritual soul like Swami Vivekananda works from within, because of its own innate power and strength. But still, from the human standpoint, future history will judge how those, in whose keeping that message was entrusted, acted, behaved, and dealt with that message. So, this is a tremendous responsibility, much more tremendous

than we can imagine.

Swamiji would say that we can render three kinds of help to people—material, intellectual, and spiritual. We can give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, medicine to the sick; that is material help. To solve the economic problems and arrange for the medical care of the people is of the first and foremost importance for a nation or a race to exist or live a life worth the name. Then comes the need for education. People must have good education. Without proper education or the capacity to think or develop the intellect, one cannot raise oneself above the animal level of existence. Animals cannot think, cannot distinguish between right and wrong, or direct their lives other than by instinct. Men can. That is what differentiates a man from an animal. So, after the problems of physical existence have been solved, for the survival of a nation, education of the people is supremely necessary. But, even with intellectual development, man rarely can follow what is right or what he knows to be right. Man, often helplessly, does what he knows to be wrong or cannot do what he knows to be right. That is why even highly distinguished scholars and philosophers sometimes live ignoble lives—lives not superior to those of lower beings. To be able to do what one knows to be right requires inner strength or spiritual development. Without spiritual development, a man's life is like a boat without any rudder. Such a man, often, wrecks his life, in spite of having much in the way of material possessions or intellectual acumen. The present world situation sadly indicates how dangerous man can be to himself, with great power in his possession but with no capacity to control that power. We live in a world where nations are behaving like frenzied creatures, engaged in acts of savagery, unknown even amongst animals. The alternatives now before the world are the complete destruction of the entire human race or the great powers coming to their senses. Nations behave madly be-

cause the people that comprise the nations have no spiritual strength. Their leaders fully know that they are leading the world to complete destruction, but they do not see any practical remedy. Blind to their own follies, they seek justification for inhuman deeds by blaming others for their own faults. That is a vicious circle, going round and round, and few are conscious of the fact that, at the centre of this circle, is the fundamental problem that man is not the master of his own mind. Man has a mind, but, instead of his controlling the mind, the mind controls him, like a wild horse driving his master, the rider. Man is helpless.

This is not a material problem, nor one which intellectual power can solve. It is, essentially, a spiritual problem—of knowing the mind or acquiring mastery over the mind. From this it can easily be seen that material help, however vital that may be, intellectual help, however important that is, are not by themselves panaceas for the ills of life. Without spiritual strength, life is not worth living, or as a practical proposition in the present age, life cannot go on. Hence Swamiji said that the solution of material as well as intellectual problems should be on a spiritual basis or with an eye to spiritual development. Otherwise, the solutions will defeat their own purposes. The present trend of affairs in the world is a stern reminder of this great truth.

Under foreign rule, India suffered from innumerable handicaps for free growth and expression. Now these handicaps are over. India is desperately trying to develop her material resources, remove poverty, spread education, and improve the health of the nation. Within a short time after independence, success in these efforts has been great and very encouraging. Nevertheless, this is just the time when India should be cautious that she does not ape and become a mere replica of the West. In that case, India will become false to herself and lose her soul. India now stands at the cross-roads. Now is the time to make a decision. A wrong

decision made now will spell disaster to future India. In this respect, the message of Swamiji will be of tremendous help.

It is not that India should be a theocratic state, or that religion should be forced on all and sundry. All do not need religion. Everyone does not have spiritual interest. Religion cannot be given in advance. Many want bread instead of religion. Give them bread. Many have their interest and delight in intellectual pursuits, they are completely satisfied with them. They have no hunger for spiritual verities. Give them directions suited to their situation. Raise them step by step to higher levels of understanding. But at the apex there must be the highest ideal—the knowledge of the meaning of life. In every country, there must be at least a few persons who have known and realized or who strive intensely for the highest ideal. Even a few such individuals will raise the level of thought and culture of that country. Their influence will filter down to the masses, and in a natural and spontaneous way, colour their outlook. The masses may not immediately live for the highest ideal, but they will have appreciation for it. That is not a small gain. Swami Vivekananda wanted the leaders of thought in India to be highly spiritual persons. But spiritual souls do not come out of the blue; they are the outcome of long and persistent efforts. Those on whom has fallen the task and burden of leading the country should remember this very strongly.

Swamiji's message was mainly spiritual. If he spoke of other things, they were simply as steps to the highest goal. The source of his strength was his spiritual realization, and the impulse of his intense activities came from his great compassion for the suffering. His mind soared to the highest, and his heart felt for the whole world.

'I am the servant of that God whom the ignorant call Man', he wrote in one of his letters. To him, every life was the mani-

festation of the Divine. If he strongly exhorted Indians and his followers everywhere to dedicate their lives for the welfare of others, it was because he saw, and therefore asked them to serve, God in man. That attitude is sure to purify all work, and make the workers unconsciously spiritual. And the result will be peace instead of conflict,

joy in place of frustration.

To keep that attitude always in mind requires an iron will, a dogged determination, eternal vigilance, and great enthusiasm for the Ideal. This is a challenge which all lovers of Swami Vivekananda will have to take up not only for the sake of India, but for the survival of the human race.

The preachers of truth are very few, but their powers are felt by those who happen to come within the atmosphere of their divine personality. 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 realms of the universe. The late Swami Vivekananda was one of those great comets who appeared in the spiritual firmament, once perhaps after several centuries. A well-known writer of this city wrote the other day: 'The passing of Swami Vivekananda was like the flashing mighty star upon our wondering eyes. For in truth, no greater, wiser, truer, holier soul has ever dwelt among us than this marvellous man who has recently gone into spirit life.' ...

No country has ever produced such a many-sided character harmoniously combined in one form as we have seen in the late Swami Vivekananda. ... Poverty, self-abnegation, self-renunciation, and disinterested love for humanity were the ornaments of this exemplary character. ... I had the honour of living with this great Swami in India, in England, and in this country (U.S.A.). I lived and travelled with this great spiritual brother of mine, saw him day after day and night after night and watched his character for nearly twenty years, and I stand here to assure you that I have not found another like him in these three continents, and that no one can take the place of this wonderful personage. As a man, his character was pure and spotless; as a philosopher, he was the greatest of all Eastern and Western philosophers. In him I found the ideal of *karma-yoga*, *bhakti-yoga*, *rāja-yoga*, and *jñāna-yoga*; he was like the living example of Vedānta in all its different branches. ...

Many have asked me why so great and good a man must die. I have said: Why should he not die? His task was finished. One ordinary human body was not enough, nor twenty, nor a hundred for such tremendous energy. Such an intense intellect and spirituality would soon dissolve the granite foundation stones.

Vivekananda is not dead, he is with us, now and for ever. He is my comfort and solace. He is the Senior Brother to the whole world.

SWAMI ABHEDANANDA