

The Message of Swami Vivekananda

JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN

The article is reproduced from the May 1952 issue of this Journal. It was an English translation of the Hindi speech delivered by the well known leader of India at our Delhi centre. The lucid and pure thought of the great mind expressed here reflect the deep reverence Jayaprakashji had for Swamiji.

Swami Vivekananda belongs to the class of great seers of Truth. His intellect was great, but greater still was his heart. He once told his disciples at the Belur Math that if a conflict were to arise between the intellect and the heart they should reject the intellect and follow the heart. Many a Mahātma has appeared in this land, and some of them understood that to meditate on the soul in the caves of the Himalayas was the correct path to follow. Swami Vivekananda's mind also was influenced by this tradition and there arose a conflict in him early in his career ; his intellect advocating the traditional absorption in Self-realization and his heart bleeding for the miseries of the people around him. In the end he came to the conclusion that leaving the solitude he would enter into the soul of every being and worship his God by serving them. And what attracts the poor and lowly to him is this compassionate heart which ever bled for them and exhausted itself in their incessant service in thirty-nine brief years. It was in the anguish of that heart that he cried out, in his memorable message at Madras, in 1897 :

Feel, therefore, my would-be reformers, my would-be patriots! Do you feel? Do you feel that millions and millions of the descendants of gods and of sages have become next-door neighbours to brutes? Do you feel that millions are starving today, and millions have been starving for ages? Do you feel that

ignorance has come over the land as a dark cloud? Does it make you restless? Does it make you sleepless? Has it made you almost mad?

It was this measureless feeling for the spiritual and material poverty and misery of his fellow men, particularly of his fellow countrymen, that drove him round the world like a tornado of moral energy and gave him no rest till the end. His life's campaigns in the East and the West, including the founding of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, were in response to this feeling. His life was all purity and love ; his coming to and going from this world was quick, sudden. But in the short period of thirty-nine years he accomplished so much by way of stirring up and infusing new life and new hope into the people that in the history of our great country we do not find a second to stand equal to him in this except perhaps the great Śankarācārya.

Today we are building a new India, in our own way. It is now that we need Swamiji's power and presence. Of course Swamiji is not physically with us ; but his words are there ; his teachings are there. They are before us. In our country there is ignorance ; there is poverty. Swamiji gave us a *mantra* in keeping with the cultural and spiritual heritage of our nation. He cut a new path, a new dharma, a religion of tolerance, universal brotherhood, and equality of mankind. We have experienced various revolutions in our country ; but we

have always preserved the soul of our culture in the midst of those cataclysmic changes. We cannot go forward, we cannot be a progressive nation by forsaking that soul of our civilization and culture. It may be that a gifted few can walk in the right path all alone, but for the rest it is necessary that they draw their inspiration from our ancient culture. Swamiji tried to do this. There were many weakening influences in our country during Swamiji's time. He wanted these to be removed and replaced by the national dynamic culture. His message was therefore to make ourselves nurtured and nourished by this culture which would lead the nation to power and strength.

We want to build the nation. How shall we do it is the problem. It is my conviction that we cannot progress unless and until there comes about a Dhārmic regeneration in our country; we need the ministrations of a *dharma* which accepts every other *dharma*, and this Vivekananda gave us in the great Vedānta. No doubt, Vedānta is not new to our country. But we had no means to find access to it; we could not make use of it; we could not practise it. We need the love and practicality of Buddha and the philosophy of Vedānta. In one of his Madras lectures, Swamiji said that he would give a message which would be useful not only to his own nation but also to the nations outside. To make his teachings effective and to make them spread among the people, just as Buddha started his organization of monks, so also Swamiji brought into existence the great Ramakrishna Mission. It is a matter of pride, it is a matter of joy, that his aims and objects are being realized and his vision is being fulfilled through the work of the centres of the Mission through all of which the Vedānta reaches the people in various forms to help the poor, to educate the ignorant, and to lift up the depressed.

The greatest problem in our country is its divergent sects, its divergent castes and creeds. Can we compose these differences? Can we go forward and gather strength? Vivekananda strongly criticized caste distinctions. He said this was the cause for much of our social weakness. Social unity was broken long ago, causing a tragedy of a thousand years! Swamiji spoke scathingly about the prevailing conceptions of religion—of religion entering the kitchen and the cooking-pots, of the religion of “don't-touchism”. He declared unequivocally that so long as we are caught in this ‘*dharma*’, we shall remain far from the *real dharma* which preaches human unity. People should unite; but there is everything to keep us disunited. A Brāhmin is engaged in Brahnavidyā. And if his son takes to business or any other activity, he is still reckoned as a Brāhmin just because he is born of a Brāhmin.

If we want to progress, we should understand the truth of *dharma* and follow it up. Quality should be the criterion of greatness or Brāhminhood and not mere birth. The aim of our *dharma* is that even a *mleccha* can be led up to the highest. Based on this fundamental idea of Vedānta, Swamiji discouraged the ‘kitchen religion’ and proclaimed that there is no difference between man and man. The difference seen is only in manifestation and not in the potential divinity. All could be brought up to the highest, all could become the greatest. Our weakness, our ignorance, can be driven away with this tonic. Can we build a society, a civilization on this great ideal of Vedānta? I believe that we shall succeed if we try earnestly. If this ideal is broadcast in our country, which Hindu will refuse to accept it? Which foreigner will fail to respond to this call to his own innate divinity? We should realize that our differences, cultural, social, and political, resulting from

this caste and other distinctions, can be composed only by this Vedantic teaching of Swami Vivekananda. By the same teaching we can solve the Hindu-Muslim problem. The question of poverty can be dealt with on the same footing. When our dream is to build a happy society, there should not be a few rich and many poor. Swamiji sought a solution for this economic inequality years ago. In one of his epistles he writes: "I am a socialist." The unity and equality he found in Brahnavidyā he wanted to establish in the field of national economy and in the field of society. Today the Rājās, Zamindārs, and the rich look down upon the labouring class. This is the opposite of what Swamiji taught. He said, "They are one with you. The same divinity shines through them and you." What unity of existence he saw in Advaita Vedanta, what equality he experienced in the human personality, the same he wanted to bring into the fields of economics and society too. He saw the hungry and the naked about him; and he felt that until they were fed and clothed no *dharma* could be preached to them; without the welfare of the masses no *dharma* could be firmly established. So today our hearts bow to Swamiji. I am a student of Swamiji. I am not worthy to talk about him. But this is what I see in him, what I learn from him. He went beyond and wanted to take us also beyond. He

sees our weakness not with the eye of contempt, but with that of compassion, with a passion to serve, with a feeling of agony at our fallen condition. In that same epistle he writes about his advocacy of socialism not as a perfect foolproof system but that "half a loaf is better than none."

I consider Swami Vivekananda a leader in every respect,—in religion, culture, economics, sociology—, all of which ought to be established on the bed-rock of Vedanta, our ancient rational philosophy. If we fail to remember this and to build our nation on the foundations of our historic legacy, then India will not remain India. We shall, through the help of the Ramakrishna Mission and by our own efforts, inspired by the Message of the great Swamiji, have to try earnestly to realize a fuller and richer life for ourselves individually and for the vast mass of our countrymen. Our progress does not stop with our own realization, but must flow into a struggle to bring the fullness of freedom to others. All of us should understand this aspect of Swami Vivekananda's teachings, and should not exclude from the purview of religion the consideration and solution of the pressing problems of our village, of our country, and of our brothers and sisters. A solution for these can be successfully achieved if we live and act up to the Message of Swami Vivekananda.

"It is love and love alone that I preach, and I base my teaching on the great Vedantic truth of the sameness and omnipresence of the Soul of the Universe."

—Swami Vivekananda