

# SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S MESSAGE

SWAMI RANGANATHANANDA

**S**UBJECTS LIKE Swami Vivekananda and the *Gita* should be taught by the people who are working in society. These are not the subjects for classroom professors or dry pundits. They may know the text, but they often lack the understanding of spirit. It is the working people who can understand the greatness of the *Gita* and of Swami Vivekananda. When you work in and for society, face the problems, and then turn to the *Gita* and to Swamiji, you get tremendous strength, tremendous inspiration, which can be conveyed to others as well. In this connection, I will narrate to you an incident that happened in 1973, at the Patna centre of the Ramakrishna Mission.

We were celebrating the birthday of Sri Ramakrishna. Distinguished speakers were there. Babu Jagjivan Ram, who was then the Defence Minister, was present. So was the Governor. I was also invited. A Swami there introduced Babu Jagjivan Ram to the audience, saying, 'We are very thankful to Babu Jagjivan Ram for coming all the way from New Delhi to address you here. He is an extremely busy person, being the Defence Minister of our country. We now request him to speak.' Babu Jagjivan Ram rose to speak. His first two sentences struck a deep chord in my heart and I have repeated them from many platforms. What did he say? 'Before I speak on the subject,'

he said, 'let me refer to my introduction by the Secretary of this Institution. He introduced me as the Defence Minister of our country. But let me tell you that I have not come to speak here as Defence Minister of India, because it is my firm conviction that if the ideas of Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji are spread all over the world, there will be no need for Defence Ministers like me in any country.'

I like the statement very much. It is simple, honest and true. All the friction in society can be removed by even a little of genuine love that comes when we realize the great Vedantic truth that we are all essentially one, we are not separate. Swamiji taught this truth all over the world. We are essentially one. There is one infinite Ātman in all of us. That must be realized. Then these frictions, this violence, these crimes and wars will become less and less. The world is waiting for that great message. Swamiji himself said that Vedanta must be preached in all parts of the world. That will bring peace and harmony. It will make you realize your own divine nature and the tremendous possibilities that lie within you. This world is a good school for you to build up your own spiritual strength.

Swamiji said that he had two great objectives to achieve. First, to present Vedanta in a simple way so that even an

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Talk given on the occasion of Swami Vivekananda's Birthday (Tithi) on 18 January 1990 at the Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad, by Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission.

ordinary student could understand it. All its various aspects must become easily understood, so that you can develop high character and broad sympathies. To Alasinga Perumal of Madras, Swamiji wrote of what he described as his 'life's work':

To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds — is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. The dry, abstract Advaita must become living — poetic — in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology — and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work.<sup>1</sup>

This was a tremendous task and we know how beautifully Swamiji has achieved it. His *Complete Works* are so simple as literature and, at the same time, are so uplifting and inspiring! Vedanta becomes simple when you read Swami Vivekananda's masterly presentation of this great subject.

Swamiji's second great objective was to start an organization which would bring the noblest ideas of humanity before one and all, so that these great ideas coming both from the East and the West could uplift humanity. All such ideas were lying buried in books. They had to be brought to the people. So Swamiji built up the Ramakrishna Order — the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission — to serve as a medium for communicating, unifying, purifying and strengthening all universal ideas and ideals for the benefit of humanity. That is the work Swamiji wanted to do. It was a mission entrusted to him by his Master Sri Ramakrishna. In his letter of 24 January 1894

Swamiji wrote from America to his Madras disciples:

My whole ambition in life is to set in motion a machinery which will bring noble ideas to the door of everybody, and the let men and women settle their own fate. Let them know what our forefathers as well as other nations have thought on the most momentous questions of life. Let them see specially what others are doing now, and then decide. We are to put the chemicals together, the crystallization will be done by nature according to her laws.<sup>2</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's best gift to humanity is Vivekananda himself. It was Sri Ramakrishna's ideas that Swamiji preached, not his own. Swamiji always acknowledged this great truth, and said: 'All the ideas that I preach are only an attempt to echo his [Sri Ramakrishna's] ideas. Nothing is mine originally... Every word that I have ever uttered which is true and good is simply an attempt to echo his voice.'<sup>3</sup>

Our country is on the threshold of a true revolution. We have heard of many revolutions where there was much bloodshed, killing, and all sorts of shouting about this and that. That type of revolution we have all heard of. We ourselves have experienced a bit of it during the partition of India. But the real revolution is yet to come — a tremendous revolution in our attitude towards ourselves and towards the world around us. Our minds are small and petty. We cannot see each other as brothers, as fellow citizens. Character-growth has not taken place. A tremendous change must come in the attitude of our people. Only then can we revolutionize the whole nation in a true sense of the term. That is the purpose of education. When more and more people study and understand Vivekananda's great message, then will come a wonderful social revolution. Swamiji has presented

1. *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 8 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama) 5:104-5 (Hereafter *Complete Works*)

2. *Complete Works*, 5:29

3. *Complete Works*. 8:79

original ideas. It is a vast literature. Plenty of ideas are there. His *Complete Works* are almost like an encyclopedia. All aspects of human development have been referred to by him. One thing he specially mentions is the difference between India and America during his time. In one of his lectures he refers to this. This itself will give us an insight into what transformation must come in our society.

Broadly speaking, our present society and the attitudes we have developed serve only to stifle every person. We do not try to help each other. 'If you stand up, I will give you a beating. Sit down, don't stand up, don't grow' — that is the attitude of our society, always trying to stifle people, making them stunted all the time. The result is a stunted society all over India. The full development of man has not taken place. This must change. Swamiji saw a different society in America. When he went to that wonderful country, the land of freedom, he saw human awareness there. In one of his lectures he says,

I used to stand on the seashore of New York and look at the emigrants coming from different countries — crushed, downtrodden, hopeless, unable to look a man in the face, with a little bundle of clothes as all their possession, and these all in rags; if they saw a policeman they were afraid and tried to get to the other side of the footpath. And, mark you, in six months, those very men were walking erect, well clothed, looking everybody in the face! And what made this wonderful difference? Say, this man comes from Armenia or somewhere else where he was crushed down beyond all recognition, where everybody told him he was a born slave and born to remain in a low state all his life, and where at the least move on his part he was trodden upon. There everything told him as it were, 'Slave! You are a slave, remain so. Hopeless you were born, hopeless you must remain.' Even the very air murmured round him, as it were, 'There is no hope for you. Hopeless and a slave you must remain,' while the strong crushed the life out of

him. And when he landed in the streets of New York he found a gentleman, well-dressed, shaking him by the hand. It made no difference that the one was in rags and the other well-clad. He went a step further and saw a restaurant, that there were gentlemen dining at a table, and he was asked to take a seat at the corner of the same table. He went about and found a new life. Here was a place where he was a man among men. Perhaps he went to Washington, shook hands with the President of the United States... Then the veil of Maya slipped away from him.<sup>4</sup>

This is literally true of the American and many Western societies. They help each other. 'Stand up, I am here to help you' — this kind of attitude is the attitude of a free mind. This is what Swamiji called manliness. 'I am here to make you stand on your feet. If you are weak, I am here to help you' — this kind of attitude is completely missing in our country. We have tried to put people down, down, down. Swamiji said, therefore, in that lecture that change must come in our country. When it comes, what a revolution it will be! 'I am here to help you.' What a beautiful idea! How does it come? By expressing a humanistic impulse from the heart of man. We miss it very much in our country.

As I said, untouchability, suppression of women, giving them no freedom at all — this kind of stunting of humanity has been taking place here for centuries. Many of the books are full of these ideas. Swamiji said, throw away all these books. Take up Vedanta, the Upanishads. What a wonderful literature, speaking of man's equality, freedom, dignity! Let us develop India on these lines. The present ways are not correct, because you see the result — man has not grown, he has not discovered the tremendous possibilities that lie hidden within him. Women have not developed their own capacity. The modern age is meant to achieve this complete development of humanity in India today.

4. *Complete Works*, 3:428-29

Swamiji presented the great philosophy of Vedanta which is so much in tune with the finest ideas of this modern age. Our people must study Vedanta and try to apply it and transform the human situation in India. That is our responsibility. That is our privilege. When you take up a job, you must remember that it is the nation's work, a citizen's work for his or her own country. That kind of attitude must come more and more to our people. This will come by the study of Vivekananda literature. It is not enough that we read a small book of Vivekananda — books like *Thoughts of Power* or *Thus Spake Vivekananda*. That is all right in the beginning. But you must take up his other great books like *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*, *Inspired Talks*, *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*. Or, better still, you can study the eight volumes of his *Complete Works* in which all the other books are included. When you read these books you will find a big, positive change coming over you.

In this connection I would like to tell you of an event that took place when I was in Calcutta in the 60s. Uday Shankar's wife brought to me her son, who is a big musician today, on his way to the Benares University for study. I asked the young man: 'Have you studied Vivekananda?' He said, 'I have read a small book.' 'That won't do,' I told him. 'Go and tell your mother to purchase from the book-stall Vivekananda's book *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*. I shall autograph it and give you.' So the mother bought him the book and gave it to the boy, Ananda Shankar. A week later the boy left for Benares and, after reaching there, wrote a letter to his mother. She was so excited when she received it that she rang me up and read out the whole letter on the phone. The substance of the letter was this: 'Mother, I entered the train at the Howrah station. It was a first class compartment, full of people, mainly railway officials. As the

train started, I started reading Swamiji's *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*. I became absorbed in it. But the people sitting near, all officers, were talking rot all the time — always complaining, saying that the government has not done this and that, etc. — the usual chat that you have today among the educated and highly paid sections of the society. In this way it went on for some time. Suddenly one railway officer stood up and came to me and said, "Boy, what are you reading?" I said, "I am reading Vivekananda's book." He almost snatched it from my hands and began to leaf through it. When he had read a few passages, he was so impressed that, turning to the other officers, he said, "What rot are you all talking! Listen to what Vivekananda says about our nation, about ourselves, about what our responsibilities are." The whole atmosphere of the compartment changed dramatically. Upto the end of the journey, there was no more of the light talk. Only a serious attitude prevailed.'

Now this is only a single incident. Thousands and thousands of such instances must happen in India, so that many of our people, getting inspired by the message of Swamiji, will be instrumental in bringing about a revolution in our society. Many of them are absolutely ignorant of the treasure of joy, the treasure of inspiration that Vivekananda literature is. They are deprived of a tremendous joy in life. But once they come in contact with Vivekananda's books and begin to read, almost invariably they feel, 'How I wish I had done it earlier!' I have heard many people say this, 'How I wish I had done it earlier!'

One American lady, almost seventy, told me that she had never thought that such ideas existed. She was a governess, teaching four daughters of a rich man in Washington. She retired when the girls were married. She came to Paris and did not know what to do.

In a Sunday paper she read about the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre at Gretz, near Paris, and about a programme there. She came there and read *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and my book *The Message of the Upanishads*. A few days later I went to Paris. There she met me and this is what she said, 'What wonderful ideas are there in these books! I am now seventy years old and I feel I have wasted all these years. If I had only got these books earlier, how blessed I would have been!' Many people have felt like this. Somehow they are deprived of a great privilege, a great inspiration. But once they get it, 'It is something wonderful,' they say. 'I never knew this.'

I will tell you a story of one Mr. Choudhari who was a Police Commissioner in Delhi when I was there in the 50s. His wife was a social worker. She had a friend who was a DSP's wife, who said to her one day, 'Why don't you come to Swamiji's lecture on the *Gita*?' The Commissioner's wife said, 'Oh, what is the use of all those lectures? I don't care for all that.' Anyway, pressed by her friend she finally came. She was tremendously impressed by our Delhi Ashrama, the surroundings, the kind of people and the beautiful ideas she heard in the lecture. All these things deeply impressed her. Then on one Sunday something interesting happened. The Commissioner, Mr. Choudhari, was sitting on the lawns having tea and chatting with his friends. She came to take leave of her husband, and said, 'I am going to the Ashrama with the DSP's wife.' In a jesting tone Mr. Choudhari said, 'Oh, you are going to the Ramakrishna Math? Well, if you catch God, bring Him to me also' — this is the language he used. When she returned home she saw the tea party was still going on. As soon as Mr. Choudhari saw her, he asked, 'Have you caught God?' She said, 'Yes! I

have. Sit down, I'll tell you what I saw there.' Then she told him her experience, describing the wonderful ideas she had heard and how they uplifted her and filled her with energy and joy. When her husband heard this, he said, 'Next Sunday I shall also come.' The next Sunday they both came together. When they returned home he told his wife, 'Henceforth you may come or not, but I am going to attend these lectures regularly!' You see, he had no idea earlier about what was going on at the Ashrama. Perhaps he had imagined that some sort of a 'ticket' to heaven was being promised to everybody there! 'Be strong. Be happy and make others happy' — this kind of teaching he had never heard. That is the philosophy of Vedanta. Swamiji's central message was *tyāga* and *sevā*, renunciation and service. That is what the nation needs today.

Throughout the Vivekananda literature another idea that comes again and again is that of fearlessness — *abhiḥ, abhiḥ*, be fearless, be fearless. Our country, which was full of fear, must become fearless once again. Fearless people are full of love, full of concern for others. That kind of fearlessness has not come to most of our people today. *Abhayam, abhayam*, that is the Vedantic language. What is the name of God? *Abhayam*, say the Upanishads. God's name is *abhayam*. And when you realize God, you also become *abhayam*, fearless.

What a wonderful message! In no other literature will you find the word 'fearlessness' used again and again as you find in Vedanta. Fear of God has no place in the Vedantic literature. It speaks of love of God. Where there is love, there is no fear. These are Swamiji's words: 'Love knows no fear.' Suppose you love your country; as a soldier you are posted in the frontier, you will have no fear at all. Your love for your country will make you fearless. But if there is no love for the country, you

would be afraid of everything, you will want to avoid everything. Today that is the psychology of many of our people. There is no love in the heart. So there is fear, there is hesitation. In a meeting on the west coast of America Swamiji spoke on Divine Love. He said, 'Love knows no fear.' Then he looked at the women in the audience. They seemed to doubt his words. So Swamiji gave them an example. He said,

Suppose one of you mothers, a weak woman, sees a tiger in the street snatching your child. I know where you will be: you will face the tiger. Another time a dog appears in the street, and you will fly. But you jump at the mouth of the tiger and snatch your child away. Love knows no fear. It conquers all evil.<sup>5</sup>

Today we need this message of fearlessness and love. This message alone can save our country. That is why Vivekananda is called *Yuga-nāyaka*, *Yuga-pravartaka*, one who has initiated a new epoch in our history. His work will continue for centuries together. It takes time to educate the people, to transform the human mind. But nothing less will satisfy Swamiji. So he spoke of revolution in India. This is what he said in his Madras lecture, 'My Plan of Campaign':

I have a message for the world which I will deliver without fear and without care for the future. To the reformers I will point out that I am a greater reformer than anyone of them. They want to reform only little bits. I want root-and-branch reform. Where we differ is in the method. Theirs is the method of destruction, mine is that of construction... Even for social reform the first duty is to educate the people, and you will have to wait till that time comes. Most of the reforms that have been agitated for during the past century have been ornamental [touching only the upper castes and neglecting the masses]... But that is no reformation. You must go down to the basis of the thing, to the very root of the matter. That is what I call radical reform. Put the fire there

and let it burn upwards and make an Indian nation.<sup>6</sup>

That kind of complete transformation Swamiji wanted. Our feudal heritage must go. A new nation will come out of this message of Vedanta. Swamiji was a revolutionary in the best and the truest sense of the term. The kind of revolution he wanted is waiting for us. All our young minds must turn in that direction. Revolution has nothing to do with throwing stones, hurling bombs, and killing people. That is no revolution today. That kind of revolution took place in Soviet Russia more than seventy years ago. And today they are disgusted with it and its results. Now they are throwing away all those old gadgets of revolution. They do not want all those things. They are now thirsty for a little spiritual message, the message of Vedanta. They have founded a Vivekananda Society there, which is a very prestigious body. Eminent scholars' and academicians are associated with it.

The modern chapter in Indian history is going to be a tremendous chapter, unprecedented in our five thousand year history. And you are the instruments for bringing about that revolution. This revolution, as I said, is of a new type: it is the revolution of the mind, of thought, of attitude, of a truly heroic attitude. Swamiji used the word 'hero' many times. This is what he said once: 'Your country requires heroes. Be heroes!'<sup>7</sup> What a wonderful thing! It is only through silent, quiet, heroic attitude that real manliness manifests itself in the person, making others also manly in turn. This is the message Swamiji has given us. We have all the energy within us to translate this message into action. In Swamiji's *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*, you find this wonderful exhortation. He says:

5. *Complete Works*, 6:71

6. *Complete Works*, 3:213-16

7. *Complete Works*, 5:51

Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when the sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.<sup>8</sup>

That is practical Vedanta. Our nation has about eight hundred million people. But the energy coming out of these eight hundred million is very little. Why is it so? Because all the energy is lying dormant, no awakening has come. But once the awakening comes, tremendous energy will be manifested. It will have a great impact upon the nation and upon the world outside. And that impact will always be wholesome, never accompanied with violence or aggression. We have never done it in the past. In future too we shall never do it. Swamiji repeatedly said that India's impact on the West is silent, calm. That is how spirituality acts — silently, calmly. India's contribution to the world is the light spiritual. Swamiji said:

Like the gentle dew that falls unseen and unheard, and yet brings into blossom the fairest of roses,

8. *Complete Works*, 3:193

has been the contribution of India to the thought of the world. Silent, unperceived, yet omnipotent in its effect, it has revolutionized the thought of the world, yet nobody knows when it did so.<sup>9</sup>

History does not record these things. Silent influences are not recorded in history. The same thing is happening today. A silent revolution is taking place. Its first visible expression was Vivekananda's appearance in America to conquer the great country intellectually and spiritually. It was literally a conquest. No less an English word will do. He conquered the hearts and minds of the American people. Now many more will do in the coming years. But all these conquests will be through love, through understanding, through a genuine concern to bring people closer and closer. That is what Vedanta is meant for — to remove all barriers of ignorance, selfishness, petty-mindedness. Swamiji has brought this immortal message to the people so that they can free themselves and also contribute something to the redemption of the modern world. □

9. *Complete Works*, 3:274

Nothing ever built arose to touch the skies unless someone dreamed that it should, some believed that it could, and some man willed that it must.

*Dr. Albert Schweitzer*