

Swami Vivekananda - The Monk who Served Truth

Tulsi Badrinath

Narendra Nath Datta, born in Calcutta on January 12th, 1863, to Bhubaneswari Devi and lawyer Vishwanath Datta, would become known worldwide as Swami Vivekananda when on September 11th, 1893, he began his address at the Parliament of Religions with the words 'Sisters and Brothers of America', speaking extempore, his heart 'fluttering' initially and 'tongue nearly dried up'.

Harriet Monroe, present at the Parliament, wrote — 'His personality, dominant, magnetic; his voice, rich as a bronze bell; the controlled fervor of his feeling; the beauty of his message to the Western world... these combined to give us a rare and perfect moment of supreme emotion. It was human eloquence at its highest pitch.' Even as he began, the electrified audience applauded for two long minutes 'as a tribute to something they knew not what'. Marie Louise Burke suggests that this 'something' radiating through the monk's words was the truth of his spiritual realization.

It was the need to meet someone who had actually *seen* God, the emphasis on realization through experience as opposed to mere knowledge, that had taken a questioning, skeptical 18 year old Narendra in 1881 to the Master of Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, whom Narendra thought 'stark mad' at their first meeting, but who affirmed, in answer to Narendra's burning question – Have you seen God, sir?, 'Yes, I see Him just as I see you here'.

Over the next five years, until Sri Ramakrishna passed away in 1886, Narendra questioned every step of his spiritual journey with that great soul. Eventually, Narendra was won over by the visible proof of Sri Ramakrishna's immersion in God, made 'his slave by his love for me', and was gifted the entire force of his Master's spiritual practice by one electric gaze. Said Sri Ramakrishna, 'O Naren, today I have given you everything I possess — now I am no more than a fakir, a penniless beggar. By the powers I have transmitted to you, you will accomplish great things in the world, and not until then will you return to the source whence you have come.' The great things Narendra would accomplish were related to Sri Ramakrishna's gentle command 'You have work to do'.

On Christmas Eve, 1886, Narendra renounced the world, 'One eye shed tears of grief when I left home, because I hated to leave my mother, grandmother, brothers and sisters; and the other eye shed tears of joy for my ideal.' It was no easy decision; Narendra's father had died in 1884, leaving his family penniless and in debt and as the eldest son, Narendra inherited litigation and crushing responsibilities. Having known involuntary poverty and hunger in this period, Narendra went on to embrace it voluntarily as a sannyasi, accepting the alms of food not only in India, but even in Chicago when he arrived too early for the Parliament of Religions.

In 1890, leaving his guru-bhais, fellow monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, with strict injunctions not to follow him, the young sannyasi travelled all over India under the names Satchidananda, Vividishananda or anonymously. For three years as an itinerant monk, the Swami carried only a staff, coarse blanket, begging bowl and two books, the Bhagavad Gita and The Imitation of Christ.

The guest of maharajas one day, Muslims the next, and of poor untouchables, the Swami saw first-hand for himself the state of the masses of India, in the grip of British rule. His heart wept for what he saw and his mind blazed. 'So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them! I call those men who strut about in their finery, having got all their money by grinding the poor, wretches, so long as they do not do anything for those two hundred million who are now no better than hungry savages.'

It was at Kanyakumari, in late 1892, that he synthesized all that he had seen and found a way to help the *daridra Narayana*, or God-in-the-poor. 'Suppose some disinterested sannyasins, bent on doing good to others, went from village to village... seeking in various ways to better the condition of all, down to the untouchable... would that not bring forth good in time?' To him, a monk's goal of personal salvation must always be readily sacrificed at the prospect of helping others, for Ramakrishna wanted them to serve all beings as Shiva. The young monk 'born for the life of a scholar— retired, quiet, poring over my books' was the first to put aside his personal inclinations in order to accomplish his Master's work, at great cost to his health.

The Swami was thirty years young, had no money nor even a name, where was he to find the money to fund his vision? It was then that an idea slowly took shape, 'to find more means for the salvation of the poor of India...I am now going to America'. His 'Madras boys' led by a devoted Alasinga Perumal went from house to house to garner funds for the trip, while his benefactor and devotee at once, the Maharaja Ajit Singh of Khetri bought him a first-class ticket on the ship S.S. Peninsular and his silken ochre robes, and bestowed on him the lasting name Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda spent three years abroad, lecturing ceaselessly, travelling miles, suffering calumny both from Christian missionaries and his fellow Indians alike, only to find that he had been cheated of much of his earnings by an American lecture bureau. However, the donations of three Western women, Henrietta Mueller, Sara Chapman Bull and Betty Leggett, made it possible for him to establish the Belur Math in 1898. In 1897, on his triumphant return to India, he had already laid the foundation of the Ramakrishna Mission, run by sannyasins in Ramakrishna's name. Today, it is one of the wealthiest charitable organizations in India, funded by the contributions of thousands of ordinary householders.

Cutting short his second trip to the West, 1899-1900, Swami Vivekananda returned to Belur Math one night in December, scaling the locked gate so as not to miss dinner with his guru-bhais! Increasingly ill with asthma, dropsy, diabetes, he was at peace in his room there overlooking the Ganga. 'The broad river is dancing in the bright sunshine, only now and then an occasional cargo boat breaking the silence with the splashing of the waves.' Once for twenty-one days he did not drink a drop of water, on doctor's orders. In the last months of his life, his ill health did not prevent him from fulfilling his beloved mother Bhuvaneshwari Devi's wish, 'I am going to take my mother on pilgrimage.... I have brought only misery to my people all my life. I am trying to fulfil this one wish of hers.'

On July 4th, 1902, before he reached the age of forty, Swami Vivekananda passed away in his room at Belur Math. 'After so much *tapasya*, austerity, I have known that the highest truth is this: He is present in all beings. These are all the manifested forms of Him. There is no other God to seek for! He alone is worshipping God, who serves all beings.'

Soon, the struggle for India's freedom intensified and freedom fighters over the years were inspired by Swami Vivekananda's pride in the

Hindu heritage and his fierce love for his motherland. But the Swami himself had shunned politics. 'Let no political significance be ever attached falsely to any of my writings or sayings. What nonsense!' he exclaimed in 1894, and 'I do not believe in politics. God and Truth are the only policy in the world. Everything else is trash' a year later.

In more recent times, when the sayings of the Swami have been appropriated out of context by politicians of various hues for their own ends but who neglect his larger message, it is necessary to reiterate that he was a monk first, a sannyasi who had renounced the world. His aim: 'The dry 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 that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work.'

What is Advaita-Vedanta? He expressed it thus, 'All is One, which manifests Itself, either as thought, or life, or soul, or body, and the difference is only in degree', adding 'We must be able to carry it out in every part of our lives'. An embodiment of the living Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda had this to say about the British who ruled India. 'No one ever landed on English soil feeling more hatred in his heart for a race than I did for the English... There is none among you who loves the English people more than I do.'

To mouth a few choice phrases from his entire works on one hand and spread communal hatred on the other is a complete negation of everything the Swami stood for. He said, 'Love binds, love makes for that oneness. You become one, the mother with the child, families with the city, the whole world becomes one with the animals. For love is Existence, God Himself; and all this is the manifestation of that One Love, more or less

expressed... Therefore, in all our actions we have to judge whether it is making for diversity or for oneness.'

Swami Vivekananda did not hesitate to speak his mind about any religion on earth, its great truths and its drawbacks in practice. He did not shy away from the truth that 'practical Advaitism, which looks upon and behaves

to all mankind as one's own soul, is yet to be developed among the Hindus universally'. 'On the other hand our experience is that if ever the followers of any religion approach to this equality in an appreciable degree in

the plane of practical work-a-day life... it is those of Islam and Islam alone'.

While he believed that Advaita-Vedanta 'is the religion of the future enlightened humanity' he was 'firmly persuaded that without the help of practical Islam, theories of Vedantism, however fine and wonderful they maybe, are entirely valueless to the vast mass of mankind'. Therefore, 'I see in my mind's eye the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Vedanta brain and Islam body'. Ultimately, 'we want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose that path that suits him best.'

We pride ourselves on being secular, but entire generations of Indians are growing up knowing very little about what it is that makes Hinduism, or *sanatana dharma*, so accepting of other religions. If we do not understand *why* our worldview makes us all-inclusive, we cannot fight fundamentalism of any kind.

So long as any human being embarks on the inquiry of the self, Swami Vivekananda's relevance is a given. More than a hundred years later, one can still enter into a direct relationship with Swami Vivekananda by reading his lectures, writings, where the most difficult of Upanishadic concepts are explained with the greatest simplicity, and his letters which reveal a man who radiated merriment, took a childlike joy in learning new things, and who used up every dish in the kitchen while cooking.

Romain Rolland's exultation, 'His words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Händel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books, at thirty year's distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports, must have been produced when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero!', holds true for all time.