

Swami Vivekananda (1863 -1902)

Swami Vivekananda was born Narendranath Datta, son of a well-known lawyer of Calcutta, Vishwanath Datta, and a very intelligent and pious lady, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, in the year 1863. Vishwanath often had scholarly discussions with his clients and friends on politics, religion and society. He would invite Narendranath to join in these discussions and even to express his views on the topics under discussion. Narendra, not in the least embarrassed, would say whatever he thought was right, advancing also arguments in support of his stand. Some of Vishwanath's friends resented Naren's presence among them, more so because he had the audacity to talk about matters concerning adults. Vishwanath, however, encouraged him. Naren would say: Point out where I'm wrong, but why should you object to my independent thinking?

Naren learnt the Epics and Puranas from his mother, who was a good story-teller. He also inherited her memory among other qualities. He, in fact, owed much to her as he used to say later. Naren was all-round. He could sing, was good at sports, had a ready wit, his range of knowledge was extensive, had a rational frame of mind and he loved to help people. He was a natural leader. He

was much sought after by people because of his various accomplishments.

Naren passed Entrance Examination from the Metropolitan Institution and F.A. and B.A. Examinations from the General Assembly's Institution (now, Scottish Church College). Hastie, Principal of the college, was highly impressed by Naren's philosophical insight. It was from Hastie that he first heard of Sri Ramakrishna.

As a student of Philosophy, the question of God very much haunted his mind. Was there a God ? If there was a God, what was He like ? What were man's relations with Him ? Did He create this world which was so full of anomalies ? He discussed these questions with many, but no one could give him satisfactory answers. He looked to persons who could say that they had seen God, but found none. Meanwhile, Keshub Chandra Sen had become the head of the Brahma Movement. He was a great orator and many young people, attracted by his oratory, enrolled as members of the Brahma Samaj. Naren also did the same. For some time he was satisfied with what the Brahma Samaj taught him, but soon he began to feel it did not quite touch the core of the matter, so far as religion was concerned. A relation of his used to advise him to visit Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar, who, he said, would be able to remove all his doubts about religion. He

happened to meet Ramakrishna at the house of a neighbour, but there is nothing on record about the impression that he created on Naren's mind. He, however, invited Naren to visit him at Dakshineswar some day. As the days passed, Naren began to grow restless about the various riddles that religion presented to him. He particularly wanted to meet a person who could talk about God with the authority of personal experience. Finally, he went to Ramakrishna one day and asked him straightaway if he had seen God. He said he had, and if Naren so wished, he could even show God to him. This naturally took Naren by surprise. But he did not know what to make of it, for though his simplicity and love of God impressed Naren, his idiosyncrasies made him suspect if Ramakrishna was not a 'monomaniac'. He began to watch him from close quarters and after a long time he was left in no doubt that Ramakrishna was an extraordinary man. He was the only man he had so far met who had completely mastered himself. Then, he was also the best illustration of every religious truth he preached. Naren loved and admired Ramakrishna but he never surrendered his independence of judgment. Interestingly, Ramakrishna himself did not demand it of him, or of any other of his disciples. Nevertheless, Naren gradually came to accept Ramakrishna as his master.

Ramakrishna suffered from cancer and passed away in 1886. During his illness, a group of select young men had gathered round him and began to nurse him while receiving spiritual guidance from him. Naren was the leader of this group. Ramakrishna had wanted that they take to monastic life and had symbolically given them *geruā* cloth. They accordingly founded a monastery at Baranagar and began to live together, depending upon what they got by begging. Sometimes they would also wander about like other monks. Naren also would sometimes go travelling. It was while he was thus travelling that he assumed the name of Swami Vivekananda.

Vivekananda travelled extensively through India, sometimes by train, sometimes on foot. He was shocked to see the conditions of rural India—people ignorant, superstitious, half-starved, and victims of caste-tyranny. If this shocked him, the callousness of the so-called educated upper classes shocked him still more. In the course of his travels he met many princes who invited him to stay with them as their guest. He met also city-based members of the intelligentsia—lawyers, teachers, journalists and government officials. He appealed to all to do something for the masses. No one seemed to pay any heed to him—except the Maharaja of Mysore, the Maharaja of Khetri and a few young men of Madras.

Swami Vivekananda impressed on everybody the need to mobilize the masses. A few educated men and women could not solve the problems of the country; the mass power had to be harnessed to the task. He wanted the masses educated. The ruler of Mysore was among the first to make primary education free within his State. This, however, was not enough in Swamiji's view. A peasant could not afford to send his children to school, for he needed their help in his field. He wanted education taken to the peasant's door-step, so that the peasant's children could work and learn at the same time. It was a kind of 'non-formal' education which perhaps he visualized. His letters to the Maharaja of Mysore on the subject show how much thought he had given to the subject and how original he was.

Other princes, or the intelligentsia as a whole, were impressed by Swamiji's personality, but were much too engrossed with their own affairs to pay any heed to his appeals. Some of the young men of Madras, Perumal specially, dedicated himself to the ideals Swamiji propounded and his contributions to the success of his mission were significant. Swamiji could guess the reason why the so-called leaders of society ignored him. Who was he? A mere wandering monk. There were hundreds of such monks all over the country. Why should they pay any special attention to him? By and large, they followed

only Western thinkers and those Indians who followed the West and had had some recognition in the West by so doing. It was slave mentality, but that was what characterized the attitude of the educated Indians over most matters. It pained Swamiji to see Indians strutting about in Western clothes and imitating Western ways and manners, as if that made them really Western. Later he would call out to the nation and say, 'Feel proud that you are Indians even if you're wearing a loin-cloth.' He was not opposed to learning from the West, for he knew the Western people had some great qualities and it was because of those qualities that they had become so rich and powerful. He wanted India to learn science and technology from the West and its power to organize and its practical sense, but, at the same time, retain its high moral and spiritual idealism. But the selfishness of the so-called educated people pained him more. They were happy if they could care for themselves and they gave a damn to what happened to other people. Swamiji wanted to draw their attention to the miserable condition of the masses—illiterate, always on the verge of starvation, superstitious and victims of oppression by the upper castes and the rich landlords.

As Swamiji arrived in Madras, young people gathered round him drawn by his bright looks and inspiring talks. They begged him to go to the USA to attend the

forthcoming Parliament of Religions in Chicago to represent Hinduism. They even started raising funds for the purpose. Swamiji was at first reluctant but later felt some good might come out of his visit to the West, for if he could make some impression there, his people back at home, who always judged a thing good or bad according as the Western critics thought of it, would then give him a respectful hearing. That is exactly what happened: Swamiji made a tremendous impression, first in the USA and then also in England. The press paid him the highest tributes as an exponent of India's age-old values; overnight he became a great national hero in India. Suddenly it was brought home to them that there must be something in Indian thought that Western intelligentsia feel compelled to admire. Slowly but inevitably, they began to revise their opinions about their own country and civilization. They began to suspect that perhaps they were not as backward as they once thought, and in areas like religion and philosophy, in art and literature, they were perhaps more advanced than the Western people. They had always felt sorry about themselves, but, now for the first time, they awoke to the richness of their heritage. This was the starting point of the Indian renaissance one hears about. A long succession of national leaders starting from Tilak have drawn inspiration from Swami Vivekananda. They 'discovered' India—her strong and weak points—through

him. ‘If you want to know India, study Vivekananda’, was Tagore’s advice to Romain Rolland. This holds true even today; indeed, no one has studied India’s body and mind so thoroughly as Swamiji did.

He described India’s neglect of the masses as a national sin. Next to this was the sin of neglecting the womanhood. Caste, in its present form, was yet another sin. India’s ethnic and religious pluralism did not worry him, for India had always sought her unity in love and respect to differing sects and communities. He saw socialism coming and he welcomed it—for India as for the rest of the world. The Sudras, i.e. the working people, were sure to come to power, and in order that the transition might be peaceful he asked the Brahmins, i.e. the intelligentsia, to pave the way to it. Lest any cultural decline should occur following this shift, he wanted to deluge the country with spiritual thought.

It was Swamiji’s hope that India would create a new social order and a new civilization by combining her best spiritual traditions with the latest advancement in science and technology. She would be rich both materially and spiritually. He knew affluence was not enough, man had to be human, too. He wanted India to set an example in this.

—*Swami Lokeshwarananda*

Sayings of Swami Vivekananda

- My ideal, indeed, can be put into a few words, and that is : to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.
- Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man.
- Religion is the idea which is raising the brute unto man, and man unto God.
- The secret of religion lies not in theories but in practice. To be good and do good—that is the whole of religion.
- Man is higher than all animals, than all angels; none is greater than man.
- One may gain political and social independence, but if one is a slave to his passions and desires, one cannot feel the pure joy of real freedom.
- Look at the wall. Did the wall ever tell a lie ? It is always the wall. Man tells a lie—and becomes a god, too.
- After so much austerity, I have understood this as the real truth—God is present in every *jīva*; there is no other God besides that. ‘Who serves *jīva*, serves God indeed.’
- Cut out the word help from your mind. You cannot help; it is blasphemy ! You worship. When you give a morsel of food to a dog, you worship the dog as God.

He is all, and is in all.

- Unselfishness is God. One may live on a throne, in a palace, and be perfectly unselfish; and then he is in God. Another may live in a hut and wear rags, and have nothing in the world; yet if he is selfish, he is intensely merged in the world.
- All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in future.
- With five hundred men, ... the conquest of India might take fifty years : with as many women, not more than a few weeks.
- Religion and religion alone is the life of India, and when that goes, India will die, in spite of politics, in spite of social reforms, in spite of Kubera's wealth poured upon the head of every one of her children.
- Before flooding India with socialistic or political ideas, first deluge the land with spiritual ideas.
- 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 harmonizing 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 the path that suits him best.
- Who will give the world light ? Sacrifice in the past has been the Law, it will be, alas, for ages to come.

The earth's bravest and best will have to sacrifice themselves for the good of many, for the welfare of all.

- Truth, purity, and unselfishness—wherever these are present, there is no power below or above the sun to crush the possessor thereof. Equipped with these, one individual is able to face the whole universe in opposition.
- Everything can be sacrificed for truth, but truth cannot be sacrificed for anything.
- Aye, who ever saw money make the man? It is man that always makes money. The whole world has been made by the energy of man, by the power of enthusiasm, by the power of faith.
- One may gain political and social independence, but if one is a slave to his passions and desires, one cannot feel the pure joy of real freedom.
- The highest ideal is eternal and entire self-abnegation, where there is no 'I', but is 'Thou'.
- All expansion is life, all contraction is death. All love is expansion, all selfishness is contraction. Love is therefore the only law of life. He who loves lives, he who is selfish is dying. Therefore love for love's sake, because it is the only law of life, just as you breathe to live.
- The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of

the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

- The national ideals of India are Renunciation and Service. Intensify her in those channels, and the rest will take care of itself.
- Good motives, sincerity, and infinite love can conquer the world. One single soul possessed of these virtues can destroy the dark designs of millions of hypocrites and brutes.
- The moment you fear, you are nobody. It is fear that is the great cause of misery in the world. It is fear that is the greatest of all superstitions. It is fear that is the cause of our woes, and it is fearlessness that brings heaven even in a moment. Therefore, 'Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached'.