

Swami Vivekananda's Loyalty to God and Man (I)

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Naren's [Swami Vivekananda's pre-monastic name] brief association with the Brahmo movement, no doubt, kept his longing for God flaming, but the leaders of the movement could not provide him any satisfying intimation about God's existence from their experience. Naren's loyalty to God at that time assumed the form of a pointed and challenging question: 'Sir, have you seen God?'

His studies of Western philosophy and sciences, no doubt, added some spice and pungency of agnosticism to the question, but in the heart of the question flamed his longing to see God. On this one question hinged his entire future. In fact, this became the central and pivotal question of his entire being.

A pure heart, he wanted to see God. But how could he go about seeking Him without learning whether or not He existed at all from one who had seen Him? So he went about seeking a man who had seen God. This search eventually brought him to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. Strange to say, Sri Ramakrishna had also been seeking him, and that for the fulfilment of a divine mission meaningful for all mankind.

In 1881, at Dakshineswar, these two persons met: Sri Ramakrishna and Narendranath—Ramakrishna, the God-man, seeking a transmitter of his endless God-

knowledge to mankind, and Narendranath seeking God in an aggressive and frontal manner, so to say. And out of this meeting there occurred the mightiest explosion of truth in the modern spiritual history of mankind.

To make the long story short, Narendranath discovered in Sri Ramakrishna the person who had seen God and could also help him to see God. And in Narendranath Sri Ramakrishna found his apostle who would be the purveyor of his limitless God-knowledge, love, and compassion to mankind.

Narendranath became a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, but a unique one, who in effect demanded his teacher to prove his credentials at every step. And in this the teacher was more than willing, for his own approach to search of God had been scientific from the beginning. He never accepted a thing spiritual without having experienced it. So he encouraged his disciple to accept his teaching only after testing it in a fool-proof manner.

Under Sri Ramakrishna's direct personal training of five years, Narendranath not only had varieties of spiritual experiences with his scientific bent of mind remaining intact, but it also helped to grow stronger, so much so that later in life Vivekananda said that he had learnt science from his Master.

What Narendra learnt from Ramakrishna

Whatever Narendra learned from his Master had to pass through the crucible of his personal experiences before he accepted these as facts of spiritual life. He never accepted any unproven dogma out of fear or pseudo-reverence. Through such a process he learnt from Sri Ramakrishna that:

1. God is. God is the fact of experience.
2. God is one, but He manifests Himself variously. God is both with and without form. God can be seen, though not with these physical eyes. He had also the experience of the identity of the Ātman with the Supreme Spirit.
3. God-seeing (or the experience of the identity of the soul with the Supreme Spirit) is the ultimate end of human life, not only because this alone brings total self-fulfilment in a person's life, but also because in it alone is the ultimate solvent of all problems of existence. Until this central illumination of life is attained, life stays cluttered with contradictions and ends in futility, whereas when this central illumination is held as the pivot of life's functional process, then are dissolved once for all, all contradictions and conflicts between the Absolute and the relative, the past and the present, the new and the old, the head and the heart, science and religion, reason and faith, East and West, my 'doxy' and your 'doxy', my 'ism' and your 'ism'.
Behind and at the root of all conflicts and sufferings is *ajnāna*, ignorance or not-knowing the truth about one's Self, and the illusion of separateness. When one realizes the identity of the soul with the Supreme Spirit, one finds the ultimate solvent of all problems of existence in the unity of existence itself. Therefore through the movement towards the unity of existence alone, there can be further evolution of

human civilization.

4. Narendranath learnt another spiritually challenging and socially revolutionary truth from Sri Ramakrishna: 'If God could be worshipped through clay images, then why not through living man?' This teaching was intimately related to another central teaching of Sri Ramakrishna: 'Jiva (a living being) is Shiva (God); not compassion to Jiva, but service to him looking upon him as Shiva.'

5. Further, Sri Ramakrishna taught Narendranath that a hungry stomach is no good for religion.

Sri Ramakrishna literally took infinite care to deepen and broaden the spiritual inlook and outlook of Narendranath, because he fully knew what he was to become and what mission he had to fulfil in life. He taught him: 'My boy, try to see the Truth from all angles and through every perspective.'¹

When one day Narendranath importuned the Master for his help so that he might stay immersed in *nirvikalpa samādhi* (the highest state of superconsciousness, in which the aspirant realizes his total oneness with Brahman) like Shukadeva, only once in a while coming down to the plane of body consciousness for taking a little food so that the body might not disintegrate, Sri Ramakrishna sharply rebuked him saying:

Shame on you! You are asking for such an insignificant thing. I thought that you would be like a big banyan tree, and that thousands of people would rest in your shade. But now I see that you are seeking your own liberation.²

This rebuke made one of the deepest impressions on Vivekananda's inner life, and gradually he became a cosmo-centric man, like of whom the world has seen only a few.

When Sri Ramakrishna was convinced that Narendra was established in the highest spiritual knowledge, it was he who carefully turned Naren's mighty love of God manward for the fulfilment of his mission on earth. On the very first day Naren had come to Dakshineswar, in a manner greatly puzzling to him, Sri Ramakrishna had stood before him with folded hands and declared: 'Lord, I know you are that ancient sage, Nara—the Incarnation of Nārāyana—born on earth to remove the miseries of mankind.'³

In order to be sure that Naren is not swept away by the power of his own realization into realms beyond the reaches of mankind, Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother: 'O Mother, bind him (Naren) with your Māyā, otherwise he will give up body in *samādhi*.'⁴ The Master was afraid that Naren, being concerned by the natural tendency of his soul only with the highest reaches of spiritual realization, would be inclined only towards deepest meditation and would be mindful only of the Supreme Reality and thus be lost to the world.

One day, shortly before his passing away, while he was in great physical pain, Sri Ramakrishna called Narendra to his side, and wrote on a piece of paper: 'Naren will teach people.' But when Narendra demurred and said: 'I won't do any such thing', the Master said with all his authority: 'Your very bones will do it.'⁵

This was the divine command and mandate given to him in writing after his training was complete and not before. This was the badge of authority and commission he received from one whom he later spoke of as 'my God on earth'.

Three or four days before his passing

away, Sri Ramakrishna called Naren to his side. Looking steadfastly at him, the Master entered into deep meditation. Narendra felt as if an electric shock were entering his body, and he lost outer consciousness. In the meantime, Sri Ramakrishna had transmitted all his spiritual power to Naren. And he said: 'By the force of the power transmitted by me, great things will be done by you; only after that you will go to whence you came.'⁶

Narendra, who had already acquired high spiritual realizations, suddenly became the possessor of stupendous spiritual powers of his guru (spiritual teacher) acquired through years of spiritual *sādhana* or discipline, and along with that was burdened with the crushing responsibility of removing the miseries of mankind and teaching people.

A couple of days before the passing away of the Master, one thing more of supreme importance happened in Naren's life. As Naren was standing before the Master's bedside, a curious thought flashed across his mind: 'He has said many times that he is an Incarnation of God. If I can make him say now as he is in the throes of death, in the midst of human anguish and physical pain, "I am God incarnate", then I will believe him!' The moment this thought came to him, the Master turned towards him and summoning all his energy said distinctly: 'O my Naren, are you not yet convinced? He who was Rāma and Krishna is now Ramakrishna in this body—but not from the standpoint of your Vedanta!' Naren was stricken with remorse and shame for having doubted, even for a moment, after so many revelations.'⁷

This one final revelation had a tremendous effect on the rest of his life.

Narendranath was now firmly convinced that he had received power and mandate from God incarnate on earth. It was one thing to deal with a knower of God, a saint, and it was quite a different thing to deal with God incarnate on earth.

What did Narendranath do with this power and mandate? That is a wondrous saga of Vivekananda's loyalty to God and Man.

Swamiji's loyalty to God

As a seeker of God, Sri Ramakrishna's training turned Naren's loyalty towards the totality of the phenomenon of God—God with forms and formless Supreme Spirit as Reality. That was how Vivekananda became a *brahmajnāni* (knower of the formless Brahman) and a *bhakta* (devotee of God with forms) *par excellence* in one. This experiential loyalty to the totality of the phenomenon of God made Swamiji one of the most powerful promoters of harmony of religions in the world. This was an implied aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's training and teachings. Therefore, we find in Swamiji a powerful defender of divine inspiration and genuine spiritual teachings in all faiths, and also a powerful opponent of all desecration and distortion of what is genuine in religions, including his own faith. Swamiji's loyalty to God has in effect served to strengthen all true faiths in the world against the onslaughts of contrary forces. His defence of faiths, having been done with all that is acceptable and respectable in the scientific method—he being a devoted student of science also—has made religions of men confidently forward-looking. On the other hand, his loyalty to science and God going together has created in modern thought a new respect for genuine

spirituality on the one hand, and genuine scientism on the other.

Swamiji's fathomless loyalty to God found a different expression, following the line of this teaching of Christ: 'Not every one that saith unto me, "Lord, Lord" shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.'⁸ In doing the will of Sri Ramakrishna whom he called 'my God in life', Swamiji practised a manner of creative total self-giving, the meaning of which for the inner history of man is yet to be thoroughly studied.

For doing the will of his 'God in life', Swamiji had, as it were, to pluck his bleeding heart and keep it as his earnest offering on the altar of God. His father had died leaving the family starving. He had the neck-breaking responsibility of arranging for their sustenance. And Sri Ramakrishna had passed away leaving the mandate and mission which could hardly be fulfilled without total self-sacrifice. He had also given him the charge of young disciples with these words: 'I leave them to your care. See that they practise spiritual exercises even after my passing away and that they do not return home.'⁹

Giving an inkling of the dilemma he faced and the choice he made, Swamiji wrote from Chicago on 29 January 1894 in a touching letter to Sri Haridas Viharidas Desai, who had very thoughtfully gone to see his poor mother in Calcutta:

... You had been to see my poor mother and brothers. I am glad you did. But you have touched the only soft place in my heart. You ought to know, Diwanji, that I am no hard-hearted brute. If there is any being I love in the whole world, it is my mother. Yet I believed and still

believe that without my giving up the world, the great mission which Ramakrishna Paramahansa, my great Master came to preach would not see the light, and where would those young men be who have stood as bulwarks against the surging waves of materialism and luxury of the day? These have done a great amount of good to India, especially to Bengal, and this is only the beginning. With the Lord's help they will do things for which the whole world will bless them for ages. So on the one hand, my vision of the future of Indian religion and that of the whole world, my love for the millions of beings sinking down and down for ages with nobody to help them, nay, nobody with even a thought for them; on the other hand, making those who are nearest and dearest to me miserable; I choose the former. "Lord will do the rest." So long as I am sincere, nothing can resist me, because He will be my help. . . . I am born to organise these young men; nay, hundreds more in every city are ready to join me; and I want to send them rolling like irresistible waves over India, bringing comfort, morality, religion, education to the doors of the meanest and the most downtrodden. And this I will do or die.¹⁰

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, there has not been one act in Swamiji's life which was not in effect 'doing the will of the Father.' And this has not been an easy walk-over.

We do not have the full record of all the days of starvation, travail, sufferings, and tests Swamiji had to go through for being loyal to God. He had to practise hard austerities to find out ways and means of fulfilling the mandate and mission given him by his *guru*. Giving an inkling of what he had to go through for being loyal to God, Swamiji wrote to Alasinga Perumal before the Parliament of Religions on 20 August 1893:

Despair not; remember the Lord says in the Gita, "To work you have the right, but not to the result." Gird up your loins, my boy. I am called by the Lord for this. I have been dragged through a whole life full of crosses and tortures, I have seen the nearest and dearest die, almost of starvation; I have been ridiculed, distrusted, and have suffered for my sympathy for the very men who scoff and scorn. Well, my boy, this is the school of misery, which is also the school for great souls and prophets for the cultivation of sympathy, of patience, and, above all, of an indomitable iron will which quakes not even if the universe be pulverised at our feet. . . .

Further, in the same letter he wrote:

Trust not the so-called rich, they are more dead than alive. The hope lies in you—in the meek, the lowly, but the faithful. Have faith in the Lord; no policy, it is nothing. Feel for the miserable and look up for help—it *shall* come. I have travelled twelve years with this load in my heart and this idea in my head. I have gone from door to door of the so-called rich and great. With a bleeding heart I have crossed half the world to this strange land, seeking for help. The Lord is great. I know He will help me. I may perish of cold or hunger in this land, but I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed. Go now this minute to the temple of Pārthasārathi, and before Him who was friend to the poor and lowly cowherds of Gokula, who never shrank to embrace the Pariah Guhaka, who accepted the invitation of a prostitute in preference to that of the nobles and saved her in His incarnation as Buddha—yea, down on your faces before Him, and make a great sacrifice, the sacrifice of a whole life for them, for whom He comes from time to time, whom He loves above all, the poor, the lowly, the oppressed. Vow, then, to devote your whole lives to the cause of the

redemption of these three hundred millions, going down and down every day.'¹¹

Loyalty to man

One could hardly trace from what moment exactly Swamiji's loyalty to God turned out to be loyalty to man. In fact, it was inherent in his loyalty to God, for his God's command was to remove the miseries of men and to teach them.

Besides, we must not forget that when Sri Ramakrishna transmitted his powers to Naren, in those very powers were two strands of love for God and man. Students of Sri Ramakrishna's life would remember that it is hard telling for whom Sri Ramakrishna wept more—for Kāli representing his God, or for Naren representing man? In the days of his *Kāli-sādhana*, when the evening came, Sri Ramakrishna would rub his face on the ground and weep saying: 'Mother, another day has passed and still I have not seen You.' But when his *sādhana* was complete, he would no longer cry for the Mother, but at the time of vesper service he would cry for the coming of human beings, the devotees. The tide which once impetuously flowed Godward, now turned manward. These were not two tides, because he had realized that 'God Himself has become all this—the universe, maya, and the living beings.'¹² It was also revealed to him that 'there is a greater manifestation of God in man than in other created beings.'¹³ From the mystical point of view, in what Swamiji received from his *guru* as transmitted spiritual power this loyalty to God and man was also inherent.

Just as Sri Ramakrishna had taught Naren to love God in a comprehensive manner, so was his manner of training him to love men also in a comprehensive

manner. In training Brahmajnāni Vivekananda to become a *vijnāni* (one endowed with special knowledge of the Absolute, by which one affirms the universe and the living beings, and sees them as the manifestation of Brahman), the Master taught the disciple to be loyal to the totality of the phenomenon of man. Therefore, as a teacher later on, Swamiji taught about 'the Real Man and the apparent man' in this vein:

The Real Man . . . is one and infinite, the omnipresent Spirit. And the apparent man is only a limitation of that Real Man. . . . the apparent man, however great he may be, is only a dim reflection of the Real Man who is beyond. The Real Man, the Spirit, being beyond cause and effect, not bound by time and space, must, therefore, be free. . . . The apparent man, the reflection, is limited by time, space, and causation, and is, therefore, bound. Or in the language of some of our philosophers, he appears to be bound, but really is not.¹⁴

Swamiji understood and accepted the dimensions of the Real Man through *brahmajnāna* (knowledge of Brahman). But for understanding the apparent man and his miseries, he had to work even harder. He did this by wandering over India on foot and by going from door to door for about three years from July 1890, to see with his own eyes and feel the miseries of the people by living with them. He went to all—from the poorest to the richest, excluding none from the scope of his understanding. This was an unusual kind of *sādhana* which Swamiji did, impelled by his loyalty to man. The Real Man had no miseries crying for removal. The Real Man needed no teaching, no saving. It is the apparent man whose miseries and ignorance needed to be removed.

Again, this Real Man and the apparent man, like the two birds of golden plumage, one looking and the other eating sweet and bitter fruits, are not two different entities. They are one in two and two in one. By virtue of his attained *brahmajnāna* and Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that 'empty stomach is no good for religion', Swamiji's loyalty to man had to be to the Real Man as well as the apparent man, that is to say, to the totality of the phenomenon of man. How did Swamiji express this loyalty?

Sri Ramakrishna had given his cryptic mandate in three Bengali words: *Naren shikshe dibe*, Naren will teach people. He had also defined his disciple's mission in a few words: 'born on earth to remove the miseries of mankind'. Sri Ramakrishna also gave him all the spiritual power and the love needed for doing this.

Swamiji's personal genius, however, was manifested in discovering the scope of this mandate and the extent of this mission and developing the instruments for executing this task. For this too, he had to

struggle hard and practise great austerities. And he had also to become deeply acquainted with the sorrows, miseries, hopes, aspirations, strength and weakness, problems and difficulties of fellow human beings, which in India he did by going about over the country on foot as the wandering monk.

Swamiji was convinced that Sri Ramakrishna's advent was for the regeneration of entire mankind. So it logically followed that Swamiji's was a world mission. He wrote in a letter rather sharply: 'I know my mission in life, and no chauvinism about me; I belong as much to India as to the world. . . .'¹⁵ This briefly but clearly defined the scope of his loyalty-mission as he understood it and worked for.

It was also clear to Swamiji that the mission of removing the miseries of mankind was to be worked for through following the mandate, which was 'to teach'. ■

(To be continued)

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* Swami Budhananda was the President, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, at the time of delivering this lecture at the Institute in 1975. This is the abridged version of the article originally published in the *Bulletin* in March and April 1976.