

Swami Vivekananda's Leader-Management Model in the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission

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Who would have thought that Swami Vivekananda, recognized in the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tradition as a knower of Brahman and World Teacher, would be considered as a model in today's world of leader-management? However, if we stop to consider what *nirvikalpa samādhi* is—a unitive experience that transcends body, mind and ego, coming back from which the knower experiences one's true Self (the Ātman) as one with Brahman and the world as a manifestation of Brahman—then we may begin to comprehend how universal Vivekananda's vision was. It transformed the Swami's outer perception and became the transcendental field of his consciousness from which all his thoughts and actions rose and fell—a consciousness, universal in application to any sphere of life he chose to apply it, including the field of leader-management.

In fact, as this paper will attempt to demonstrate, Vivekananda's non-dual experience also empowered him to assimilate it in a solid master plan of a reform Math and Mission in India.¹ Today this twin organizations stand, universal in their principles (within its monastic community it honours a diversity of Chosen Ideals and incorporates a breadth of four yogas as prospective spiritual disciplines), democratic in structure, and far-reaching in

application—beyond caste, creed, and country in its service to the underprivileged.

Furthermore, Vivekananda's unitive experience, which unveiled his vision to perceive the one Self in all, awoke within him a compassion for humankind which surpasses normal human empathy. In 1893, before leaving India for the Chicago Parliament of World Religions, Vivekananda disclosed to his brother monk, Swami Turiyananda, who preferred contemplative life to public service: “Haribhai, I am still unable to understand anything of your so-called religion.” Then with an expression of deep sorrow on his countenance and intense emotion shaking his body, he placed his hand on his heart and added, “But my heart has expanded very much, and I have learnt to feel. Believe me, I feel intensely indeed.” His voice was choked with feeling; he could say no more. . . . Swami Turiyananda was also overcome. . . . “Are not these”, I thought, “the very words and feelings of Buddha?” . . . I could clearly perceive that the sufferings of humanity were pulsating in the heart of Swamiji: his heart was a huge cauldron in which the sufferings of mankind were being made into a healing balm.²

Vivekananda brought this love to bear on his leadership decisions and managerial interactions which galvanized his initially

small band into an army of dedicated workers. The Swami often stated that he needed just ten of twelve smart young men who were ready to renounce everything for the welfare of others and could sacrifice their lives by applying his ideals for their own spiritual welfare and for that of their country. Then fired with burning faith, he would be able to 'turn the whole current of thought and aspiration of his country into a new channel.'³

How could such a dream materialize? Vivekananda was an innovative leader-manager. In 1897, when the Ramakrishna Mission was still a fledgling organization, he instructed his disciple Swami Shuddhananda: '[H]old a meeting to consider, "how we can reap the best permanent results out of the small means at our disposal." Let all have notice a few days before and let each suggest something and discuss all the suggestions, criticizing them; and then send me a report.'⁴ Here Vivekananda's leadership morphed into management skills that optimized the small team's time, manpower, and creativity by (1) suggesting ideas, (2) critically evaluating and selecting the best plans, and then (3) discerning their strategic fit into the mission. Brainstorming, popularized as a management tool in the 1940s by advertising executive Alex Osborn, creates team synergy that Vivekananda could foresee as a useful method to stimulate innovative ideas.⁵

Historian Asim Chaudhuri stated: 'Leaders do the right thing, and managers do things right.'⁶ Vivekananda did both. At a time when Hindus were imitating their conqueror, the British Raj, by adopting scientific atheism and succumbing to missionary evangelism,⁷ while most Westerners viewed Hinduism as an idolatrous, mind-boggling religion, Vivekananda's mark in India and the West is

all the more remarkable. The Smithsonian Institute acknowledged in its 1976 *National Portrait Gallery*: 'At [the 1893 Chicago World Parliament of Religions], the Swami charmed audiences with his magical oratory, and left an indelible mark on America's spiritual development.' By the time the 'Cyclonic Hindoo Swami' returned to India after three years of post-Parliament classes and lecture tours, having initiated at least several thousand aspirants in a meditation mantra practice,⁸ his homeland greeted him as a national hero who had vindicated India to the world.⁹

Furthermore, with the remaining seven years of his short life, the Swami went on to marshal into existence the advent of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, a revitalized monastic Order and spiritually-inspired service-centred Mission that lifted traditional Indian monasticism out of hermitages, caves, and cloistered Maths and into Maths often connected with sevashramas, where monks served in schools, hospitals, and orphanages for the underprivileged, or were temporarily posted to disaster-plagued areas of India. This revolutionary model of monasticism broke the mould of what it meant to be a Vedanta monk in a traditional Order of sannyasins. Instead, along with traditional scriptural study and devotions, Vivekananda introduced a practical Vedanta called *sevā yoga*, work performed as worship of the one Self in all. In doing so, the Swami harnessed the non-dual goal of *jnāna yoga* (knowledge) to the methodology of *karma yoga* (selfless action) in order to set *jnāna yoga in action* through service to the 'living god,' the poor and underprivileged of India. Vivekananda foresaw that this path would not only bring joy to the giver but elevate the receiver, not only physically and intellectually, but also spiritually—and

thereby serve the nation. Vivekananda's revolutionary methodology of Advaita Vedanta in action achieved recognized spiritual and material results.

At the turn of the 20th century, with Swami Vivekananda's blessings, Kalyanananda and Nishchayananda, worked tirelessly to establish a dispensary for sadhus, the poor, and untouchables in Kankhal, at the foothills of the Himalayas. At first, orthodox sannyasins of the Shankara Order shunned both swamis as 'scavenger monks' for defiling themselves by not only breaking caste, but touching excreta. However, Swami Dhanaraj Giri, the esteemed Abbot of the Kailash Math of the Shankara Order, observed their selflessness and, in 1903, encouraged two wealthy businessmen to help finance the construction of a *Sevashrama* for the swamis' medical relief work. Around the same time the Abbot also invited both the swamis as his honoured guests to a traditional congregational feast of the Shankara Order.¹⁰ By receiving such support and recognition, the Ramakrishna Order and Vivekananda's reform monasticism became officially accepted by the traditional Shankara Dashanāmi sannyasins.

Jack Welch, ex-CEO of General Electric, defined a leader as someone with (1) a clear vision for organization, (2) the ability to communicate that vision, and (3) the ability to manifest it into reality. This was Vivekananda.¹¹ Records show that the Ramakrishna Math and Mission continued their vigorous growth from the time of their inception¹² until today,¹³ well over a century after the Swami's passing—with over 179 official branch centres throughout India and the world, including America, as well as hundreds of unaffiliated centres worldwide.

John Maxwell's 'Law of Explosive

Growth' further clarifies Vivekananda's leader-managerial success: 'If you develop yourself, you can experience personal success. If you develop a team, your organization can experience growth. If you develop leaders, your organization can achieve explosive growth.'¹⁴ Vivekananda had the foresight to develop a leadership within the twin Ramakrishna organizations that would safeguard their future. On 30 January, 1901, the Swami executed a Trust Deed, vesting all the Belur Math properties in a Board of Trustees consisting of his eleven brother-disciples, excluding himself and his own disciples in order to prevent any future legal complications. Swami Gambhirananda's *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, further elaborates: 'In the Trust Deed there was provision for the election of a President by the Trustees from amongst themselves, to hold office for two years only.'¹⁵ Afterwards, Swami Vivekananda resigned as President of the Order in favour of Swami Brahmananda, 'thus divesting himself of all authority.'

In his book *Vivekananda—a Born Leader*, Asim Chaudhuri further expands how the Swami energized and ensured the organization's future leadership by utilizing its youth and rotating leadership:

He [Vivekananda] held that unless they were given freedom of decision in their sphere, with responsibilities to shoulder, they would never learn to stand on their own feet and work wholeheartedly for the cause. They formed themselves into a body and elected a superintendent from among themselves every month. The organization had apparently adopted, presumably with his approval, the concept of a "Self-directed," or "Self-managing" team (with "Rotating Team-appointed Leader") long before it came into vogue in the late twentieth-century business world and was then touted

as “a tool for the twenty-first century.”¹⁶

A servant leader

‘Rotating leadership,’ Chaudhuri explains, ‘encourages involvement and development of each team member, it nurtures a culture of equality, and eliminates the possible hazards of status accumulation or a self-serving mindset. . . .’¹⁷

Vivekananda not only promoted others to positions of a broad-based ‘team’ authority, but he also introduced a democratic system of government into the Math’s organization to further stabilize and ensure its future growth. Furthermore, in 1897, he formulated the ‘Rules and Regulations of the Ramakrishna Math’ to systematize monastic training.¹⁸

In 1894 the Swami wrote from the US to his brother-monk Swami Ramakrishnananda: ‘A leader is born,’ he stated. ‘Do you understand? One must be *dāsasya dāsa*—a servant of servants, and must accommodate 1000 minds. There must not be a shade of jealousy or selfishness, then you are a leader. First, by birth, and secondly, unselfish—that’s a leader.’¹⁹

Ramakrishna had recognized Vivekananda as a born leader, a soul of a very high order,²⁰ whom he vested with authority. In 1886 at the Cossipore garden house, a few days before his passing, Ramakrishna wrote on a piece of paper: ‘Narendra will teach others.’ When Naren, the future Vivekananda, protested, Sri Ramakrishna replied unequivocally: ‘You shall *have* to do it.’²¹ In 1897, the Swami revealed the prophecy of those words to his brother-monks: ‘I have work to do! I am a slave of Ramakrishna, who left his work to be done by me, and will not give me rest till I have finished it!’²² His ‘work’ was, after all, nothing less than setting in motion a worldwide Vedanta movement—the colossal work of a World Teacher.

However, Vivekananda was also a servant leader. In the 1970s, Robert Greenleaf, in his book *Servant Leadership*, popularized this model: ‘The servant leader is servant first. . . . It begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. This conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.’²³ Such self-sacrifice was modelled in Vivekananda’s life. In May 1898, a few months after the land for Belur Math had been purchased, a Calcutta plague broke out and the Swami vowed to serve those who were stricken, even if it meant selling the newly purchased Math grounds.²⁴ Fortunately, this never became necessary as sufficient funds soon arrived.

But what is important to note here is that Vivekananda, an adept in *karma yoga*, thereby focused on the means (whole-souled selflessness), knowing full well that the right result would follow. *Karma yoga* is, after all, work as worship, without any shopkeeping. When that transpires, the giver feels joy and the receiver feels uplifted. However, without this internal attitude, the action is bereft of *yoga* and the result is just *karma*.

A successful owner of a Caterpillar dealership in Japan would have agreed with Vivekananda’s principle, albeit on just a material, transactional level. When the owner visited the manufacturer’s tractor plant in Illinois, he asked him: ‘Why are you wasting money inspecting the manufactured product? Pay close attention to the process and the product will take care of itself.’²⁵

Larry C. Spears proposed ten characteristics of Servant-leadership—listening, empathy, healing, awareness of one’s self, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of all, building community—some of

which this paper has already addressed in Vivekananda's effective leader-management 'style.'

Stewardship and conceptualization

Vivekananda possessed the spiritual genius to envision innovative extrapolations from basic Vedanta principles, which he first heard from Sri Ramakrishna in 'sutra' form, as it were. For example, Ramakrishna practised various religious paths to their culmination—both within and outside the Hindu tradition. Therefore, from the standpoint of his non-dual experience, he proclaimed with authority: 'As many people [faiths], so many paths,' which, according to Ramakrishna, all lead to the same Truth. Vivekananda then voiced this universal principle of religious harmony at his 'Final Address of the Parliament of Religions' by prophesizing his famous interfaith proclamation: '[U]pon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: "Help and not Fight," "Assimilation and not Destruction," "Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."'”²⁶ Thus Vivekananda is today recognized as a 'pioneer of East-West dialogue.'²⁷

Another extrapolation of Ramakrishna's same *sutra* can be found in Vivekananda's ingenious synthesis of the four yogas—*jnāna yoga* (logic and analysis), *rāja yoga* (psychic control and meditation), *bhakti yoga* (devotion), and *karma yoga* (selfless action)—which he culled from the diverse systems and schools within Hinduism. Vivekananda then framed all four yogas as corresponding to the four aspects of an individual's psycho-physical being—*jnāna yoga*, the discriminative faculty; *rāja yoga*, one's contemplative nature; *bhakti yoga*, human emotions; and *karma yoga*, one's active nature. By combining the four yogas in a ratio that best suits each Vedanta practitioner's own temperament,

Vivekananda introduced a more holistic approach to spiritual practice—exemplifying the harmony of religions or, in this case, the harmonious balance of distinct yogas, or paths.

To take Ramakrishna's harmony of religions a step further, Vivekananda in his lecture 'Ideal of a Universal Religion,' posited that the four yogas, which comprise the essence of the Hindu scriptures, can be adopted and practised not only by Hindus, but by Jews, Christians and Muslims, without relinquishing the integrity of their root traditions. In fact, the yogas can be applied to any faith tradition, whether dualistic, qualified non-dualistic, or non-dualistic, and to any Chosen Ideal.

Thus we find Vivekananda's three contributions to world religions mentioned above are inspired extrapolations of Ramakrishna's single axiomatic statement: 'As many people [faiths], so many paths.'

Empathy and healing

Vivekananda's empathy and healing are leader traits, perhaps, best exemplified by how he assimilated Ramakrishna's radical teaching to *transcend the very notion of compassionate service to others* by serving others as God—or, in his own words, 'Serve *jiva* as Shiva.'²⁸ Here, Vivekananda re-fashioned Ramakrishna's *sutra* into service of the 'living god,'²⁹ the principle behind the Ramakrishna Mission's activities. It lifts work to the level of worship, communion with the Divine *within the individual served*. By doing so, the *karma-yogi* elevates *karma yoga* from a practice that solely purifies the mind to one that is experiential and, thereby, *is a direct means to realization*.

Listening and foresight

Undoubtedly Vivekananda's early itinerant days spent wandering throughout the length and breadth of India, helped him

gather the necessary experience of his motherland to later inform his plan for the Ramakrishna Mission's service. It was a time of keen observation and deep 'listening.' He saw the plight of Indian women, victims of child marriage and lack of education. He also saw oppression of the poor, the 'dominance of the priesthood, the despotism of caste.'³⁰ In Vivekananda's authoritative biography, we read:

His heart throbbed for the masses, great in their endurance. He seemed to enter, in some high mode of feeling, their world. In their sufferings he found himself sharing; by their degradation he found himself humiliated. He longed to throw in his lot with theirs. . . .

But what was the remedy? The clear-eyed Swami saw that renunciation and service must be the twin ideals of India. If the national life could be intensified in these channels, everything else would be taken care of.³¹

Thus Swami Vivekananda saw how to make India's monasticism relevant to the contemporary age, as exemplified in the Ramakrishna Order's motto: *ātmano mokshārtham jagaddhitāya cha* ('For one's own salvation, and the good of the world').

A further insight was Vivekananda's methodology, which bypassed social reform and went instead to the root of the problem. '[S]ocial evils are a sort of disease in the social body,' the Swami stated, 'and if that body be nourished by education and food, those evils will die out of themselves. Hence instead of wasting energy in the trumpeting of the social evils, it should be the aim of the smart to nourish the social body.'³²

Community-building and commitment to the growth of all in the organization

'*Ātmano mokshārtham*' spotlights Vivekananda's central ideal of Self-realization as the key to building a monastic

life. And with that firmly intact, a monastic can successfully carry out the second part of the motto, '*jagaddhitāya cha*'. Without a meditative life, Vivekananda well understood that an aspirant quickly forgets Who he is working for. In the 'Rules and Regulations of the Ramakrishna Math,' Vivekananda laid out meditation as one of the 'principal duties' of the monastic.³³

Awareness of one's Self and persuasion

Swami Brahmananda once stated: 'Sri Ramakrishna was revealed to the world at large through Swamiji. Know that their words and teachings are not different.' What does this mean? Indeed Vivekananda *was* the mouthpiece of Ramakrishna, because as Ramakrishna himself disclosed to Naren: 'My Siddhis [powers] will manifest through you in time.'³⁴ Along with such powers Vivekananda could not help but feel the presence of the author who had transmitted them. As the Swami later divulged to Girish Ghosh in February 1897: 'GC, I carried your Thakur [Master] to the other side of the ocean,' meaning the West.³⁵

Not only did Vivekananda feel Ramakrishna's spiritual proximity but also his spiritual empowerment, which gave him a strong sense of Self, along with an inner conviction that could face down even his brother monks who sometimes took exception to his revolutionary Mission activities and Western methods, which seemed to them unaligned with Ramakrishna's instructions. On one occasion Vivekananda challenged Swami Yogananda: 'Well, how do you know that all this is not on Shri Ramakrishna's lines?'

He had an infinite breadth of feeling, and dare you shut him up within your own limited views of life? I will break down these limits and scatter broadcast over the earth his boundless inspiration. . . . Time and again have I received in this life marks

of his grace. He stands behind and gets all this work done by me.³⁶

Swami Yogananda acquiesced.

Perhaps one of the most poignant examples of Vivekananda's servant-leadership, which demonstrated both his commitment to community-building and to the growth of all, took place shortly before his passing. One day the Swami confided to

a devotee: 'I shall never see forty.' 'But Swami,' the devotee protested, 'Buddha did not do his great work until between forty and eighty.' Vivekananda then explained, 'I delivered my message and I must go. The shadow of a big tree will not let the smaller trees grow up. I must go to make room.'³⁷

Such self-sacrifice is the mark of real servant-leadership, surrendering one's very life for the good of an organization. ■

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 About the establishment of the Ramakrishna Math, Swami Vivekananda stated: 'All our associations centre around that garden [at Cossipore]. In reality, that was our first Math.' (*Complete Works*, 8. 411.) The Ramakrishna Mission was established later in 1 May, 1897. See Swami Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957), p. 119.
- 2 His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979), p. 388.
- 3 *Life 2*, p. 630.
- 4 Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Memorial Edition (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1990), 7, p. 509.
- 5 Asim Chaudhuri, *Vivekananda—a Born Leader* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2014), p. 172.
- 6 *Vivekananda—a Born Leader*, p. 65.
- 7 Swami Chetanananda, *Girish Chandra Ghosh: a Bohemian Devotee of Sri Ramakrishna* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2009), p. 11.
- 8 *Talks with Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2012), p. 465.
- 9 In 1984, Vivekananda's January 12th birthday was recognized by the Government of India as the 'National Youth Day.'
- 10 Swami Abjajananda, *Monastic Disciples of Swami Vivekananda*, tr. Chhaya Ghosh (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2003), pp. 244-45.
- 11 In Jack Welch's own words, a leader is 'someone who can develop a vision of what he or she wants their business, their unit, their activity to do and be. Somebody who is able to articulate to the entire unit what the unit is and gain through a sharing of the discussion—listening and talking—an acceptance of that vision. And then relentlessly drive implementation of that vision to a successful conclusion.' (See *Vivekananda—a Born Leader*, p. 36.)
- 12 1 May, 1897.
- 13 8 June, 2015.
- 14 *Vivekananda—a Born Leader*, p. 204.
- 15 *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, p. 144.
- 16 *Vivekananda—a Born Leader*, pp. 103-104. See also *Life 2*, p. 418.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 18 *Life 2*, pp. 245-46.
- 19 *Vivekananda—a Born Leader*, p. 53.
- 20 *Life 1*, p. 76. According to Vivekananda's own firsthand account, at his first meeting with Ramakrishna, the Master divulged Naren's true nature: '[Ramakrishna] stood before me with folded hands and began to address me, "Lord, I know you are that ancient sage, Nara, the Incarnation of Narayana, born on earth to remove the miseries of mankind," and so on!'
- 21 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 182.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 2, p. 253.
- 23 *Vivekananda—a Born Leader*, p. 52. Robert

K. Greenleaf (1904–1990) was the founder of the modern Servant-leadership movement and the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership.

24 *Life 2*, p. 328.

25 *Vivekananda—a Born Leader*, p. 149.

26 See 'Address at the Final Session of the Parliament of Religions,' *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Memorial Edition (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1990), Vol. 1, p. 24.

27 Father Thomas Keating's cover endorsement of Vedanta: Voice of Freedom (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis,

1986), Swami Chetanananda's edited compilation of Swami Vivekananda's works.

28 *Life 1*, p. 523.

29 *Complete Works*, 8, p. 169.

30 *Life 1*, p. 341.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 341-42.

32 Vivekananda, Swami. 1897. 'Rules and Regulations of the Ramakrishna Math.'

33 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

34 *Life 1*, p. 182.

35 *Girish Ghosh*, p. 349.

36 *Complete Works*, 6, pp. 477-78.

37 *Life 2*, p. 638.

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argumentativeness of Sri Harsha but includes an appeal to an interpretation of the text of the Shruti. As reason develops from sensory perception to an understanding of the Shruti, experience also undergoes a parallel transformation. Reason and experience are inseparably intertwined. They mean the two aspects of the same cognitive process. Let us not downplay this supremely rational critical activity by talking about revelation and supernormal experience. There is no fake in the Vedas; their *apaurusheyatva* and *svatapramāna* are painstakingly established by rational critic. The harmonizing path is that for which I as a modern vedantin hope in exploring the relationship between reason and experience today. I have sought to show the harmony between the two, rather than condoning the postulation of a clear-cut dichotomy between the two that characterizes most of the Western

philosophical discourse. We must consider carefully the advantages of traversing the path of intellectual harmony in our lives not only as excellent researchers, teachers and scholars but also as citizens of the emergent global community. Issues of human rights, environment, oppression and terrorism affect us all. We are the progenitors of the kind of world which is to follow us. The attitudes which we take in interactions within this community can have an impact upon generations. If we teach the virtues of intellectual curiosity, tolerance, open-mindedness coupled with judicial analysis of new and divergent ideas of fostering forums where with the genuine exchange of the idea or by means of the example we set through our own introductions in this community by whatever means, we might find ourselves participating in it or in any, then we can hope positively to impact the future of this world community. ■

* This article is based on a lecture, Prof. Bina Gupta delivered at the Institute on 2 January, 2003.