

## Practical Importance of Swamiji's Ideal for the Present Age

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If we study the cultural history of the world, we can see that it is in fact a history of ideas generated by great thinkers. When those ideas deal with ways of life, human character and conduct, we regard those thinkers who gave such ideas as World Teachers. Swami Vivekananda was one of those great World Teachers who appeared in the latter half of the 19th century.

Speaking about Swamiji's advent, another great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Abhedananda, once stated: 'Such a preacher of truth occasionally appears like a gigantic comet above the horizon, dazzling the eyes and filling the hearts of ordinary mortals with wonder and admiration, and silently passes away into the invisible and unknown realm of the universe. The late Swami Vivekananda was one of those great comets who appeared in the spiritual firmament once perhaps after several centuries.'

As a World Teacher, Swamiji came with a message and a mission. His message and mission are inseparable from each other. That is to say, Swamiji's message had a practical end in view. His ideas were immensely practical.

### Swamiji's message

What was Swamiji's message? His

message was derived from three main sources. These three sources were: his own Master, Sri Ramakrishna; the ancient system of Indian thought known as Vedanta; and his own vast reservoir of illumined knowledge. The core of Swami Vivekananda's message, the central guiding principles of his life, was derived from his Master's personal guidance. Swamiji interpreted the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna in the light of Vedanta. As a system of philosophy, Vedanta consists of several schools. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda accepted all the schools of Vedanta, but they gave primary importance to Advaita Vedanta.

Advaita Vedanta is based on three well-known principles: 'The ultimate Reality known as Brahman is the only Truth, the world is illusory, and the individual Self is one with Brahman' ('*Brahma satyam, jaganmithyā, jivo brahmaiva nāparah*'). How can such a philosophy have any practical significance? The genius of Swami Vivekananda lay in converting the abstract Vedanta philosophy into an immensely practical, dynamic system of thought and ideals and a way of life for the modern world. Referring to this, Swamiji stated: 'But one defect which lay in the Advaita was its being worked out so long on the spiritual plane only, and nowhere else; now the time

has come when you have to make it practical. It shall no more be a *Rahasya*, a secret, it shall no more live with monks in caves and forests, and in the Himalayas; it must come down to the daily everyday life of the people; it shall be worked out in the palace of the king, . . . in the cottage of the poor, by the beggar in the street, everywhere; anywhere, it can be worked out.<sup>1</sup>

If you study the ancient books on traditional Advaita Vedanta, you will find that it was meant only for certain highly qualified persons known as *adhikārins*. But Swami Vivekananda's message is meant for all people without any distinctions of caste, class, race or religion. He said that he wanted to set in motion a machinery by which the highest and noblest ideals will come to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest.

Swamiji's primary concern was man. He identified himself with the whole of humanity. He travelled all over India, all over the world. He lived with the common people in India and in the West. He saw everywhere the human being in chains. He saw everywhere the sufferings of human beings. And he knew that all human suffering was caused by only one thing—ignorance. Ignorance of what? Ignorance of man's true nature.

It was in this context that Swami Vivekananda propounded his most famous Vedantic concept: the potential Divinity of the soul. What did Swamiji mean by 'potential Divinity of the soul?' According to Vedanta, man's true nature is neither the body nor the mind, but the spirit known as the *Ātman*; and this spirit is an inseparable part of the infinite Supreme Spirit known as Brahman or the Supreme Divine. But, owing

to ignorance, man is not aware of his true nature. All these ideas Swami Vivekananda compressed into the trenchant dictum: 'Each soul is potentially divine.'

Swamiji showed that it is ignorance of this ideal, it is ignorance of one's true divine nature, that is the root cause of all our failures in life. This is the message that modern man needs most in the present-day world. The world we live in is undergoing tremendous changes. Social life has become too fast to cope with. Financial problems and crisis are increasing day by day. Owing to this change, competition and consumerism, human life has become very complex, difficult and stressful. As a result psychological problems, psychosomatic diseases and social disturbances have also increased beyond human control.

#### **A centre of stability**

In this situation what everyone needs is a centre of stability and peace in the human personality, remaining where man can remain unaffected by the turmoils of life. What the modern man needs most is a divine centre within where he can access spiritual strength, power and inspiration to face the problems and difficulties in life. This is what Swami Vivekananda's concept of potential Divinity of the soul gives. It tells us that all the power, all the knowledge, all the glory, all the peace that we seek outside is already within us. An infinite source of strength is within everyone of us.

Once we become convinced of this fact, we gain great courage to face the problems of life. Regarding this, let us listen to Swami Vivekananda's own words: 'It is weakness, says the Vedanta, which is the cause of all misery in this world. Weakness is the one cause of suffering.'<sup>2</sup> Again, he says, 'The

remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness, but thinking of strength.<sup>73</sup> ‘Strength is goodness, weakness is sin. If there is one word that you find coming out like a bomb from the Upanishads, bursting like a bombshell upon masses of ignorance, it is the word fearlessness. . . . Either in this world or in the world of religion, it is true that fear is the sure cause of degradation and sin. It is fear that brings misery, fear that brings death, fear that breeds evil. And what causes fear? Ignorance of our true nature’<sup>74</sup>, says Swamiji.

Swami Vivekananda’s doctrine of potential Divinity of the soul implies that the solution to the basic problems of human life is to be sought within oneself. Instead of blaming God or blaming other people for our failures and misfortunes, we should learn to look within ourselves and try to find the real cause of our problems in our own minds. Swamiji stated: ‘Say, “This misery that I am suffering is of my own doing, and that very thing proves that it will have to be undone by me alone.” That which I created, I can demolish. . . . Therefore, stand up, be bold, be strong. Take the whole responsibility on your own shoulders, and know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succour you want is within yourselves.’<sup>75</sup>

Man is the maker of his own destiny. This does not, however, mean that Swami Vivekananda advocated a self-centred form of spirituality. According to Swamiji, the aim of religion is to liberate man from a limited self-identity and enable him to identify himself with the whole of humanity, with the whole world. A liberated person sees God in all people and serves Him. Human life is too great and valuable to be spent on one’s own good, one’s own

happiness alone. Swami Vivekananda regarded unselfishness as the highest virtue.

### **Service : a way of life**

For Swamiji, serving one’s own fellowmen is not a mere duty, it is a way of life. Serving people, especially serving the poor, the sick and the distressed should be the natural way of living in the world. Service is to be done not out of compassion. It is an insult to human dignity to render help with an attitude of pity or compassion. God dwells in all people as the all-pervading Supreme Spirit. Giving help to others should be done as service to God. It is indeed a great privilege to be able to serve God in this way. He said: ‘It is our privilege to be allowed to be charitable, for only so can we grow. The poor man suffers that we may be helped; let the giver kneel down and give thanks, let the receiver stand up and permit. See the Lord [at the] back of every being.’<sup>76</sup> In another place Swamiji wrote: ‘. . . this life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive.’<sup>77</sup>

This ideal of service to man as service to God can be applied in all fields of our daily life. It can be applied in one’s own family in dealing with the members of one’s own family. It can be applied in dealing with our colleagues in the workplace. Such an attitude of divine service, if cultivated by all, can transform the whole fabric of society.

### **Harmony of religions**

Another ideal of Swami Vivekananda which has immense significance in the present-day world is the ideal of harmony of religions. This ideal Swamiji got from his Master and teacher, Sri Ramakrishna. The doctrine of harmony of religions taught by

Sri Ramakrishna forms the real basis for what is nowadays known as Religious Pluralism. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the religions of the world are different paths to the ultimate goal, '*jato mat, tato path*'. These paths are not mutually contradictory but complementary.

Swami Vivekananda has pointed out that every religion has two aspects or dimensions. The outer dimension consists of rituals, customs and doctrines. The inner dimension is spirituality. There is a good deal of variation and diversity in the outer aspect of religions, but there is a good deal of similarity in the inner spiritual dimension.

What is now needed is an attitude of acceptance towards world religions. The main reason for this is that many countries, especially India, the United States, the U. K., and some other European countries, have now multi-religious population. People belonging to different religions actively participate in the various service and development activities of governments. Therefore there should be an attitude of acceptance towards different religions, not mere tolerance. Speaking about this attitude, Swami Vivekananda said: 'Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often

blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. . . . I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him.'<sup>8</sup>

In these days when social harmony is frequently disturbed by religious fanaticism which often takes the violent form of terrorism leading to the loss of precious human lives, Swami Vivekananda's and Sri Ramakrishna's ideal of harmony of religions has immense practical significance.

The celebration of the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda provides an occasion for us to focus our attention on the universal significance of Swami Vivekananda's message for the progress, prosperity and peace of all people all over the world.

At this crucial juncture in the history of humanity, when globalization, electronic revolution, environmental concern and other factors are bringing people closer and closer together, Swami Vivekananda's message can serve as a unifying, harmonizing and guiding force in individual lives, in social life and even in international relationships. ■

#### REFERENCES

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\* This article is based on the address, Srimat Swami Suhitanandaji Maharaj, the former General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, delivered at Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna, Gretz (France) on 28 September, 2013. Srimat Swami Suhitanandaji Maharaj is now a Vice-President of the Order.