

Swami Vivekananda and His Message to the West

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Children of immortal bliss

If Swami Vivekananda declared Buddha had a message for the East, he himself was born for the West. I can here deal with the subject only partially. Readers of Swamiji's works will very often come across one idea that he puts, not only before the West but all humanity, and it is that man is divine. Man has been conceived of in various ways. Some would go to the extent of saying that man is a sinner. There is evil in the world and that cannot be denied. And anyone living in the world is willy-nilly breeding it into himself and herself. During one of Swamiji's talks, somebody remarked that Adam had committed the original sin and from him man has inherited it and hence he is a sinner. Swamiji replied, if Adam fell he fell from goodness. He was good before and he became a sinner later on. So, basically human beings are all good. It is the environment and circumstances around us which make us appear under a different garb. Swamiji said it is a sin to call men sinners. Quoting a sanskrit verse he says:

Shrinvantu vishve amritasya putrā ye dhāmāni dibyāni tasthu
'Children of immortal bliss'—what a sweet, what a hopeful name! Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name—heirs of immortal bliss...Ye are the children of God... holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth—sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature.

Sons of Immortality—that is what we, human beings, are. Unless we believe in this, we cannot really be good. It is said:

Nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate satah; ubhayorapi drishto'ntastvanayos tattvadarshibhih. (B.G. 2.16): Of the transient there is no endurance, and of the eternal there is no cessation. This has verily been observed and concluded by the seers of the Truth, after studying the nature of both.

What does not exist can never come into existence, and what exists can never vanish into nothing. If men are really sinners they never can become good, if men are good they never can be sinners. Swamiji's idea was that since human beings come from Immortal Bliss, they cannot be sinners. Sri Ramakrishna also used to say, if somebody considers himself a sinner, sinner he will be. But if he regards himself as good, good he will become. It depends on how we think, how we believe ourselves to be; and men are essentially divine. This is the idea that Swamiji places before us.

There is another idea which Swamiji dwells upon and that refers to Darwin. Darwin's idea is that society progresses through a struggle for existence, and that the fittest will survive. How does human society progress? Is it by fighting or through cooperation and sympathy? I read in an article long back in which the writer says that human society is protected not by the soldiers or the police, but, by the kindness that we show to

our neighbours, the feelings of love that we have for one another. It is the expression of love in actual life that really helps society on. Swamiji says, a robber robs, but why is he doing so? It is out of love. Because he loves his family, his children, his wife. So by some error of judgement he thinks that by robbing he can give expression to his love. It is love that is inspiring him to do something which is patently wrong. So at the bottom of everything we find that man is really divine and it is his divinity that is inspiring him to do so many things in so many ways. Swamiji placed that idea before everyone of us. And why is it so important?

We may consider man from different points of view. We may even consider some men to be subhuman creatures not having any intelligence or education. We may treat them as if they were animals. If that is our conception of man then what use shall we make of him? Just put men to beastly uses—nothing more than that! If that is our belief then we can make slaves of them, exploit them and their countries by colonizing them. Even if we think that they are sons and daughters of God, the question will arise, which God, please? We are the chosen people of God and you are not. So you are some way inferior to us, you have to serve us. We have the right to rule over you. This is how the conception that we have about man colours our activity, our action, our reaction towards others. But if we can really think of them as equal to us in every way, it opens up a vista of human development that society never dreamt of.

Here Swamiji tells us that, if we are really to advance and bring peace to the world, it must be through this philosophy, this idea, the realization of this fact that all human beings are really divine. We must help them manifest their divinity, we must serve them to see the God that is in all of them. That is what Swamiji has wanted us to do.

Sisters and brothers

On 11 September, 1893, in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, the first words that fell from his blessed lips were—Sisters and Brothers of America. A new nation which had succeeded in the spheres of science and technology and in other departments of human life had been waiting to hear from the savants that gathered there a clear enunciation of the basic idea that should move humanity and inspire all people. But the expectation was not fulfilled until Swamiji rose to utter those words. Seven thousand people in that Hall of Columbus stood up and gave him a standing ovation. There was purity in him, there was sincerity in him, there was a promise of the salvation of humanity that they had long been waiting for. A man coming from an undeveloped country, considered inferior to the West, and representing the coloured people claimed equality with all—Sisters and Brothers of America! And the claim was readily conceded by America.

We are all divine. We are all equal; maybe we have not expressed ourselves fully, maybe there are so many differences, but a day may come through mutual help, cooperation and love when we all shall really be equal and stand on the same footing with one another. That idea Swamiji placed before humanity. And as I say, a new door of development was opened up. We have to walk along side by side, hand in hand. Much depends on how we look upon others. You are going by the street in your car and find some people fighting among themselves; you don't even look at them—it happens in the world, just an everyday occurrence. But suppose in that quarrel one is your friend or a relation of yours, a son, a brother. Would you not stop your car and go to help your friend or relative? Why? Because you have some relation with him, because you have some sort of conception about him

which is very near and dear to your heart. If you have this sense of relationship, if you have this kind of feeling about other human beings then you would hardly respond in another way. Then the world is bound to change.

Swamiji's idea of religion

Granted that 'Divinity' is there in man, but it is in some way related to the deity, to the divine. Unless we know God, how, indeed, can we know what divinity is? I heard the story of one Indian sage meeting a Greek sage and the former asks the latter: What is your subject of enquiry? The Greek sage replies: It is man. But how can you know man without knowing God?—comes the question from the Indian sage. That question is still there. How can we really know man without knowing God? We have to know God first and then only we can know what divinity is. How to know God? Swamiji replied: Religion is realization. It is not mere theory. It is not mere superfluous talk. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, don't float on the surface, dive deep and in the bottom of the sea you will discover fine gems. Dive, dive, dive. That was what he said. Don't be superfluous.

In the West people believe in speeches and in organization. The power of organization, the technique of organization—the East is learning this even now from the West. The West mostly talked about things, did things without any reference to God which Swamiji likened to doing some municipal work—building good houses, hospitals, schools, roads in the name of religion, going to church as a formal matter, a sort of drilling and regimentation. Swamiji could not find any religion in that. Religion is the matter of the heart, a matter of realization and unless we know what God really is, unless we dedicate ourselves fully for this realization, it is no religion at all. That is the conception that Swamiji had, that is the idea

he had inherited from Sri Ramakrishna, and that was also what Swamiji taught in the West. Religion must be taken up as a matter of seriousness in one's life. It is not just a superficial thing. Not mere talk, not mere philosophy even. Since Swamiji took up this thing seriously, his life, his words, his very personality had so much force. Just at the end of his speech the ladies there jumped over the rows of benches to just have a touch of him, to have a little bit of holiness through that touch. One lady standing at a corner said: My boy! if you can resist that onslaught then shall I know that you are a saint. He did resist it, because he was a saint. Because he was so pure, his words had force. Because he had seen God and realized God, people listened to him.

The four things

I am talking of the West now; don't think that I in anyway in this matter place the East above the West. No. In matters of God-realization we are on equal footing and we all must be sincere. Now Swamiji, when going through the West, found that people were merely talking philosophy and, while doing things in the name of God, they were not taking religion very seriously. So he talked to them, delivered lectures before them on religion for many days and for many years to place *four* things before them prominently. His lectures were mostly delivered in the West. Swamiji had some definite ideas in his mind while doing so. The four *yogas* he placed before them were the *Jnāna-yoga*, the *Rāja-yoga*, the *Bhakti-yoga*, and the *Karma-yoga*. Each had special meaning for the West. In *Karma-yoga* he pointed out that it is not merely doing some work in a temple or in a sacred place and then dedicating the result to God. No. Our whole life has to be turned into a religious practice in some way. The thought of God must be there in every

moment, in every turn, in whatever we do. Whole work, nay, whole life, has to be turned into worship. This is an idea Swamiji expressed fully and wholly but this was not a new thing. Even Shankarāchārya, who is supposed to have denied the world and thought of it as a form of delusion, says in one of his hymns:

*Yat yat karma karomi tattadakhilam
shambho tava ārāadhanam.*

‘Whatever I do, that very thing is a worship of yours.’ Work is worship. That is what Swamiji taught. But it must be worship. Does doing anything according to one’s sweet will and thinking that one is finishing one’s duty become a worship? No. We must think of God, it is God’s work that we do. If we can do that and think that it is God’s work, then only it really becomes worship. So he gave a turn to our idea of work, brought in a new idea, a new viewpoint. We have to live in the world, we have families, we just can’t leave them even if we want to be religious. We have to be religious just where we are. We can’t have an imaginary world to live in. So, how we can think of God even amidst this work is a problem that confronts us. And this is the solution that Swamiji offers. Do all your work as trustees. God has appointed you as trustees, as it were, for bringing up your family, for looking after their comfort, for serving your society, for serving your nation, for serving the whole of humanity. That should become a sort of worship to you. That is real *Karma-yoga*: making every moment of our life a sort of worship to God, thinking of God always in everyday. That is the ‘practical vedanta’ that Swamiji places before us.

Coming to devotion, the West had known only God as Father. But Swamiji presented God as Mother, Friend, and in many other forms which are nearest to our hearts and through which we can think of

God with more intensity, with more devotion, with more love and with more enthusiasm. The West had thought of only one incarnation. But Swamiji showed that there can be not only one but infinite incarnations. Swamiji has showed this in his *Bhakti-yoga*. But more important were his books on *Rāja-yoga* and *Jnāna-yoga*.

Rāja-yoga

In *Rāja-yoga* he talks of meditation, intense meditation for getting everything. Our life, our thoughts—all become scattered. These have to be gathered somehow. Man has to study his own mind to get it integrated and not scattered by random thoughts and ideas. One must sit quietly, have some peace of mind and then only life can become peaceful. Without meditation life becomes a misery to you. That is the illness that is pestering the West. They are running after so many things—rush and more rush. I sometimes stand on an over-bridge overlooking a highway and watch the cars running on all five and six lanes. I wonder, what is all this rush for? Is it all that necessary? Perhaps it is necessary when you put want before you, when you create your wants more and more everyday and find out newer means of feeding them. That is not the end of human life. What is human life meant for? Sambhu Mallick went to Sri Ramakrishna and said, Sir! I have some money. I want to spend it for schools and hospitals. Sri Ramakrishna said: Well, charity is quite a good thing, but what is the purpose of life? Is it making schools and hospitals, or realizing God? If God comes to you, would you ask for more schools and hospitals? Won’t you ask for devotion to his lotus feet? While doing good for others you don’t know how your selfish ideas of name and fame creep in. So be careful. Devote your time and energy to meditation on God. Pray to Him

and that is what is needed. *Rāja-yoga* opens up the way of how to meditate, how to concentrate one's mind, how to make life worth living, how to dedicate it to God. Then comes Vedanta Philosophy.

Vedanta

Swamiji emphasized Vedanta for various reasons. In Vedanta he found the possibility of a universal religion. How? In any religion we depend on some person. If for some reason or other, that person is known to be non-existing or the words put in his mouth are found not to have belonged to him, then the religion itself is in danger. Or, if we gather ourselves under a sect and that sect is liquidated or found to be anachronistic where shall we stand then? Sectarianism, you may know, brings in all kinds of false ideas. I recently heard of a lady who told one of our swamis, that India was not progressing because it's not Christian. What a nonsensical idea! Well, there are many countries which are Christian and lagging behind others. There are countries where people don't believe in any religion and they are progressing. Again there are countries which are not Christian and still progressing. Look at Japan for example. So it is not that. We are concerned with the real meaning of religion and not with material prosperity which may or may not depend on religion. Our concern is realization which comes through *karma*, through devotion, through meditation and through discrimination between what is right and what is wrong, what is permanent and what is impermanent.

Vedanta does not stand for any book. It stands on the realization of saints and prophets who have seen the Truth and noted down the revelations in their books. Books come second, first comes the man of realization. This satisfies our reason and conforms to our expectation in religion. If

we follow the same path, we also can see God. We can also visualize God. That is one great point we have to remember.

Nowadays there is science, there is technology. Vedanta says, well, so much for your science, your technology, your intellectual exercises. Every science, every method of knowledge has its own scope, but if it oversteps its limits, everyone will say: No sir! Please keep to your own field. If the eyes see red colour and the ear says, no, that is not red, eyes will not hear it. Ear hears sound. If the eye says, this sound is not loud, the ear will not admit the fact. So each one has his own field. Science has its own fields, technology has its own. Rationality has its own fields, but realization or the vision of God is a different thing which comes through intuition, inspiration.

There are two kinds of knowledge, we say. One is knowing a thing analytically. A sweetmeat tastes very nice when I eat. But if I want to impart that knowledge to somebody it becomes an impossibility. This kind of analytical knowledge does not carry us far. It is through intuition, through meditation that we can realize God. That is what Swamiji says, that if we are to be religious, we must be religious as it should be—not in mere talk, not in dreaming, not in regimentation. There can be no such thing as democracy in religion. Swamiji said the Hindus have thirty-three crores of God. Perhaps there were thirty-three crores of Hindus as well. Well and good—one for each. Let there be a few more crores so that people can pick and choose. What is the idea? Men differ in their taste and in their capacities.

*Rucināmvaicitryādrijukutilanānāpatha-
jushām nrināmeko gamyastvamasi
payasāmarnava eva !*

O Lord, just as the ocean is the destination of various rivers, in the same manner you

are the destination of all the people who follow various straight or curved paths as per different tastes.

So we admit that there will be different tastes. Somebody in the house brings some fish for the family, but each member has his own liking. The lady of the house cooks the fish in different ways and that way everybody becomes satisfied. So also in religion. Each must have his own way of thinking, his own way of seeing things according to his capacity.

They talk of coexistence in politics nowadays. I don't know where the idea came from, but I feel it might have come originally from Sri Ramakrishna himself. He lived about a hundred years ago. What he taught might have taken wings and spread all over the world. Gradually, people are taking them up, accepting daily without perhaps knowing their source. But it is there. All these nations having different ideologies can live together and it is possible to live. How? Only if you believe that others are also good, that they are also progressing. Swamiji said we not only tolerate, we accept. He declared—I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan and pray there. I shall go with the Christians to the church and pray with them, with the Jews to their synagogue and pray with them too. That is acceptance, that is friendliness, that is cooperation, that is sympathy, that is love. All these things are necessary if humanity is to survive and have peace in this world. These ideas Swamiji spread broadcast for the good of the world. He brought these ideas to the West and brought in a new meaning of the *Bible* and the life of Jesus Christ.

God in human body

Well, I should like to put before you a question, although I do not know how you will react to it. Did Jesus Christ have a

human body, or did he not have one? Had he human feelings or had he not? Christians would at once say, he was a unique phenomenon; no human ideas can be ascribed to him. Body, mind and all that do not come into consideration in his case. Then, how did he feel the pain and say: My God, have you forgotten me? How did blood ooze out of his body? If you take such a stand that Jesus Christ had no body in the human sense, that he had no pain, then many of his teachings as well as his doings would become meaningless to us. Of course he came to save humanity. Other incarnations also did the same. They took human bodies and showed how people could be religious in the face of dire calamities and stick to God. Unless God shows these things to human beings, how, indeed, can we know? And also when I say Jesus Christ was a monk, they say, how can he be one? I say, take the dictionary meaning of the word. A man having no relationship with his family and possessing nothing is a monk. Jesus Christ said, the bird has got its nest but this son of man does not know where to lay his head. Was that not talking like a monk? So why should I not consider Jesus Christ a monk? They would not understand me. They say Jesus Christ is God. Do I deny it? Do I deny that Sri Ramakrishna is God? Never. I can never do so. Still, Sri Ramakrishna had a human body, had his diseases, and he passed away, just as all human beings do. So our ideas as we have them have to be changed. Christ's teachings in the *Bible* can be interpreted through Vedantic sense. Well, I am giving you just some examples where the ideas in the West can be widened, if we take them to Vedanta and understand them freely and fully with an open mind. I don't know how they will

interpret it in the West and whether they will accept all these interpretations or not. We accept Jesus Christ, but we accept him in our own way. Why should we quarrel with them?

Swamiji says the West has to accept this Vedanta just because it is rational, just because it does not unnecessarily fight with science. If you go on fighting with science and technology your whole religious building will simply collapse and will be torn to pieces. It cannot stand on the foundation of belief alone—unless there is some reason behind it. And it is Vedanta philosophy that supplies the philosophy behind all religions. It is the universal religion in the sense that it supplies the *raison d'être* for all religions.

The way to peace and freedom

Swamiji observed that the Western society was standing on the brink of a volcano, as it were, and unless man mended his ways it might erupt any day. He said it long back. After that World War I came, to be followed by the Second World War. What did Swamiji really mean? He meant that societies and nations must build themselves on religion. They must stick to God. It is not merely individual life that should be religious, but in groups also, in society also, in nations also we must stick to God—...*nālpe sukhāsti bhūmaiva sukhā*...—there is no happiness in the finite; that which is infinite is the real source of happiness. *Tameva viditvātīrityumeti nānyah panthā vidyate 'yanāya*—by knowing Him alone one would get peace and freedom; there is no other way to go. That is what the Upanishads say. All peace comes from God and sticking onto God.

They say that religion makes one unbalanced, that religion is the opium of the masses, that, like a constable, it holds down people and keeps peace. Well, these are idle talk. Sivnath Shastri, a Brahmo gentleman, once said the same thing to Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna retorted: You people who stick to gold and want to enjoy the world of lust and lucre can keep your balance of mind, and, I, thinking of God, have become unbalanced? What nonsense are you talking?

In this world we see they have got their League of Nations, and what has all this come to? They sit in conferences, which soon turn into debating clubs, and no conclusion is arrived at. They can't solve any problem. Why?

Hiranmayena pātreṇa satyasyāpihitam mukham !

I quote from the Upanishad. It has a profound meaning, but I apply it here. There is the golden vessel which covers up the face of Truth. Because they are running after gold, they don't see the Truth. They are making the world worse than what it is now. So when Swamiji, Sri Ramakrishna and others said we must stick to God, they meant that unless people are good, no matter how many parliamentary legislations they may make, they will find out loopholes to escape through them. That is how the world has been going on. Man has to be made better. Religion has to be established in every heart. God has to be realized. Unless we take it seriously, there can be no peace in the world, there can be no peace in human life, individually or collectively. This, in brief, is Swamiji's message to the Western world. ■

* This is a slightly abridged version of a lecture, Swami Gambhirananda, the 11th President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, delivered at Santa Barbara Vedanta Temple on 29 October, 1972.