

Sevā : The Thread of the Garland of Yogas

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The path for the age

Truth is one; sages say it in many ways. However, the interpretations depend on the need of the hour. Swami Vivekananda said, ‘There must be a person who is in sympathy with the present generation. This is fulfilled in Sri Ramakrishna. So now you should place him before everyone.’¹

In what way should Sri Ramakrishna be placed before all? Swamiji also said, ‘He is the embodiment of infinite spiritual ideas capable of development in infinite ways.’² ‘Sri Ramakrishna is a force. You should not think that his doctrine is this or that. But he is a power, living even now in his disciples and working in the world. I saw him growing in his ideas. He is still growing.’³ Thus, the manifestation of the spiritual ideas of Sri Ramakrishna would be a growth from within the society. In order to have a proper expression of this potential power in the society, Sri Ramakrishna chose Swami Vivekananda as the messenger to the world. Swamiji had the unique insight to understand the deep import of the words of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Saradananda wrote in his biography of Sri Ramakrishna, ‘In truth, no one but Narendra could understand and properly express the extraordinary actions and words of the wonderful Master. Narendra’s interpretations of the Master’s sayings sometimes amazed us, and we would think, “Well, we also heard

the Master say those things, but we did not realize that they had such deep meanings.”⁴

In the well-known incident of Sri Ramakrishna’s utterance of ‘*Shiva Jnāne Jiva Sevā*’, Swamiji heard Sri Ramakrishna saying, ‘Recognize all as manifestations of God and serve them as such.’ He then opined with quite amazement,

What a wonderful light I saw today in those words of the Master! How beautifully did he reconcile the simple, sweet, and refreshing ideal of devotion with the knowledge of Vedanta, which people believe to be dry, difficult, and heartless! For so long we have heard that anyone who wants to attain nondual knowledge must retire to the forest, shunning family and friends completely and forcibly uprooting love, devotion, and other sweet sentiments from the heart, driving them away forever. If aspirants who strive to attain that knowledge consider this world and all people within it to be impediments to their spiritual path, they will develop hatred towards them and go astray. But what the Master said today in his ecstatic mood is clear: One can bring Vedanta from the forest to the home and practice it in daily life. Let people continue with whatever they are doing; there is no harm in this. People must first believe and understand that God has manifested Himself before them as the world and its creatures. Whoever people come in contact with in every moment of their lives, whomever they treat with love, respect, and compassion—they all are parts of

God, God Himself. If people consider every human being to be God, how can they consider themselves to be superior to others and harbour anger, hatred, and arrogance—or even compassion—towards them? Their minds will become pure as they serve all being as God, and soon they will experience themselves as parts of the blissful God—by nature, illumined, and free. The Master’s words also shed a special light on the path of devotion. As long as an aspirant cannot see God in every being, it is not possible to attain true and supreme devotion. When true devotees serve human beings as Shiva or Narayana, they see God in others and are soon blessed with supreme devotion. The followers of karma yoga and raja yoga will also find great light in the Master’s words. Embodied beings cannot remain without activity for even a moment, so their duty is to perform every action as service to God within human beings; thus they will soon reach the goal. If it’s the will of God, I shall proclaim to the world at large the noble truth that I’ve heard today. I shall preach this wonderful message to all—the wise and the ignorant, the rich and the poor, the Brahmin and the pariah.⁵

Thus, Swamiji discovered the religion of the age, the ‘*Yugadharmā*’, a ‘*new*’ path.

However, spiritual aspirants often face a dilemma to choose the ‘right’ path for themselves. The general understanding is that there is a distinct difference between the secular and spiritual modes of life. However, Swamiji has obliterated that distinction in this new path. Sister Nivedita rightly pointed out in her introduction to the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,

It is this which adds its crowning significance to our Master’s life, for here he becomes the meeting-point, not only of East and West, but also of past and future. If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of

worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid. This is the realisation which makes Vivekananda the great preacher of Karma, not as divorced from, but as expressing Jnana and Bhakti. To him, the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple. To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality.⁶

The crucial point to comprehend is that the newness of this new path lies in being the fulfilment of the traditional paths as per the need of the present age. ‘The path that is perpetually dark to ordinary souls is luminous to the avatar. The avatar boldly advances and, after reaching the goal, inspires people to follow. Thus, the avatar discovers new paths to the realization of Brahman, or God, again and again in every age.’⁷ Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly pointed out this need so that religion becomes a matter of real practice rather than a mere theory. He said, ‘Look, the currency during the reign of a Nawab cannot be the legal tender during the reign of a Badshah.’⁸

The present age is the age of materialism. People are as if glued to their identification of ‘me and mine’. However, there was, is, and will be always the inner longing that would urge even modern man to search for his soul. The traditional paths mainly emphasize the transcendental aspect of the Ultimate Reality, thus making the element of other worldliness the main

characteristic of spirituality. However, the new path also emphasizes the immanent aspect of the same Reality keeping in mind the aptitude and attitude of the people of the present age. The traditional paths stand equally valid as they were through ages and there are and would be always aspirants who will find themselves eligible to practise them. The lack of competence is visible often in the common people. However, the advent of the Avatara opens a floodgate of spirituality in a simple and doable way for the masses. Swami Vivekananda has done that in propounding the 'Sevā Yoga' for this age.

The path that fulfils other paths

'Jnāna Yoga' asks for the constant discernment between the real and the unreal. However, in the context of the strong idea of body consciousness, this appears to be indeed a Herculean or rather impossible task. To practise 'Jnāna Yoga' in the modern times, the aspirant generally depends on the intricate philosophical understanding of the scriptures. This enforces a sense of detachment from the world, which builds itself up in the constant endeavour of negation of the world. In working out this stupendous task in the schedule of modern ways of life, the seeker may end up practising mere philosophical pursuits or identifying the indescribable Ultimate Reality as an 'entity' that can be deciphered intellectually. *Sevā* is not merely a concept that can be articulated philosophically only. The one who has done even a little bit of *Sevā* realises its efficacy in bringing out the oneness of all beings. When one wholeheartedly serves others, the unripe ego spontaneously turns into the ripe ego, by losing its selfishness and gradually evolving towards selflessness. The expansion that *Sevā* brings to one's life makes one lose the

sense of me and mine, and gives one a glimpse of the Truth of the One, which manifests immanently. Thus, *Sevā* adds the element of accessibility for the modern practitioner to the deep realms of 'Jnāna Yoga'.

'Bhakti Yoga' emphasizes devotion to the personal God, mainly through the practice of various rituals. The scepticism born out of rational temper often doubts the presence of limitless God in limited symbols. Such a practice of connecting to a personal God ends up in propitiating God for one's personal needs and problems. People often think of God as either a boon-giver or a trouble-shooter. When one unselfishly serves another thinking the other to be a manifestation of God, a grand symbol of divinity, the selfish nuances of worshipping God drop by themselves automatically. When a living entity responds with a look, a smile, or a word of thanksgiving, the act of service immediately reaches its fulfilment; giving the same feeling of the acceptance of one's worship by God. Thus, transforming our entire life to act of worship of the immanent divinity all around us, *Sevā* brings a sense of completion to 'Bhakti Yoga'.

'Rāja Yoga' asks for the practice of psychic control. Concentration is the key. This again appears as a tremendous challenge in front of a modern man trying to take up practices of 'Rāja Yoga'. The present tsunami of the influence of the electronic gadgets and social media just makes the situation worse. Meditation often ends up as an endless endeavour of withdrawing the mind from the objects of the world rather than being a natural way of concentration. However, an act of dedicated service itself becomes a kind of meditation with 'open' eyes, a spontaneous control on the restlessness of the mind, thus making the practice of concentration as mentioned in 'Rāja Yoga' more satisfying.

‘Karma Yoga’ demands the desirelessness for the results of the actions from the practitioner. This idea often appears to be abstract for the modern mind, which has been trained incessantly to strive for success in all that is being done. *Sevā* gives one a sense of inner bliss, which propels one to serve more and more. This is the ‘result’ of the actions that makes them instruments of liberation rather than bondage, thus making the practice of ‘Karma Yoga’ immensely fulfilling in the modern times.

We must take into consideration again the fact that the traditional paths are not to be blamed, as eligible aspirants have reached the goal in all ages through them. The problem is with the lack of competency in people of the present times. Sister Nivedita rightly pointed out the contribution of Swami Vivekananda in solving this problem. ‘The truths he preaches would have been as true, had he never been born. Nay more,

they would have been equally authentic. The difference would have lain in their difficulty of access, in their want of modern clearness and incisiveness of statement, and in their mutual coherence and unity.’⁹

Sevā is often understood to be only the ‘service to the have-nots’. However, *Sevā* is a way of life. It is the unselfish offering of one’s body, mind, and intellect to all, and it thus refers to the state of living in a way where none is a stranger; all are one’s own. *Sevā* thus starts with our families and friends, and evolves into the loving relationship with our associates in the place of work, our neighbours, our society, our nation, our world, and all that is sentient and the insentient in the entire creation. ‘*Sevā* Yoga’ not only unites us with the world around us with wholehearted acts of service, but it also unites us with the divinity that is in us, and immanent in the world around us. It is indeed like the thread of the garland of Yogas. ■

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* Swami Vedanishthananda is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order.