

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND VEDANTA (*)

By Swami Paratparananda

* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – Jan 1963; Vol. 50; page 362

India has been the perennial source of religious revival for millenniums now. This source has been augmented, replenished and reinforced from time to time by a succession of sages and seers through the ages. This life-giving stream of religion has never been allowed to dry up during its meandering course through the dreary desert of this world. Its course might have been obstructed, checked or seriously hampered but was never lost; on such occasions it gathered momentum to flow with greater vigour and to reach far-off lands. Each sage was, as it were, a tributary emptying itself into the main stream, with this difference that each originated at and was nourished by the same spring, the Eternal Religion (*Sanātana Dharma*). Each one left one more edifice, one more haven for the scorched humanity to rest its limbs on its onward march to God.

Beginning from the Vedic period down to the present century we see waves of spirituality passing over the country; each one guiding humanity and rescuing it from foundering on the rock of dogmatism and sophistry, from unbelief and unrighteousness, at the same time catering to the particular need of the age. When such a nadir was reached in the last century a powerful wave arose and on the crest of it was Sri Ramakrishna. His was a very short span of life but intensely spiritual. After a long period of extensive sadhana and realizations he collected round him a few young and energetic youths, picked and chosen to be his torch-bearers and banded them together into a brotherhood before he left his mortal coil. He named Narendranath, who later became the world-renowned Swami Vivekananda, to be the leader of the brotherhood and commanded him to minister to the spiritual needs of humanity, much against Narendranath's own inclination for a quiet and meditative life. Sri Ramakrishna specially trained him for this purpose.

Sri Ramakrishna's training of Narendranath in Vedanta

Sri Ramakrishna's power to see through the past, present and future of an aspirant who came to him, and also his visions regarding Narendranath, had revealed to him who Naren was and what was his mission on the earth. He verified these visions and conclusions on Naren's third visit to Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna on that occasion took him to the adjacent garden of Jadu Mallik and in the course of conversation entered into a trance. In this state the Master touched Narendra.

Narendra, in spite of his best efforts to remain unaffected by the touch, instantly lost all out-ward consciousness, as on the previous occasion. Sri Ramakrishna put him several questions when he was in that condition and learnt many things which confirmed his visions and findings about Naren's antecedents. Then onwards Sri Ramakrishna started training him in the path of Advaitic knowledge. But Narendra was not to submit easily. His inquiring and analytical intellect could not accept anything as true unless he experienced it himself or it stood the test of reason. So when the Master requested him — with a view to familiarise him — to read aloud some passages from such Advaitic treatises as the *Ashtavakra Samhita*, he revolted saying, 'It is blasphemous, for there is no difference between such philosophy and atheism. There is no greater sin in the world than to think myself identical with the Creator. . . The sages who wrote such things must have been insane.' Sri Ramakrishna was amused at this outspoken comment of his disciple. He argued with him that no one could place a limitation on God, that he should be such and such and not anything else, but to no purpose. Narendra continued to criticize such ideas for some time more. One day Sri Ramakrishna, having failed to convince his disciple by argument about the truth of Advaitic realizations, touched him in an ecstatic mood. There was an immediate change in the disciple's vision. He saw with his eyes open that there was nothing else in the universe but God. He kept his vision to himself to see how long it would last. When he went home and sat for food he saw that the plate, the food, the server, all was God; on the streets the cab, the horse and himself, he found were made of the same stuff. This experience continued for some days and with it came to him the conviction about the truths of Advaita philosophy, which no amount of argument could have been able to bring. That was the mode of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching.

Sri Ramakrishna was, however, careful to enlarge the disciple's vision regarding other faiths and paths. Even the path considered most indecent and vulgar, Sri Ramakrishna said, was a path if there was a real and intense longing for God. One day while Narendra was condemning certain practices of some sects Sri Ramakrishna gently told him, 'My boy, a mansion has many entrances. Some of them no doubt are dirty like the scavenger's entrance to a house. It is really desirable to enter the house by the front door.' Naren thereafter was never seen to condemn any sect. By these gentle methods Sri Ramakrishna helped to wipe out bigotry and puritanism from the disciple's mind.

It was never the procedure with Sri Ramakrishna to force his own views on the disciples. He allowed them to grow naturally, helping them in their own path. Naren once felt it difficult to go beyond the body idea and approached the Master for the remedy. How the Master helped Naren to overcome this impediment we shall learn from Narendranath himself: 'On another occasion I felt great difficulty in totally forgetting my body during meditation and concentrating the mind wholly on the ideal. I went to him for counsel, and he gave me the very instruction which he himself

had received from Totapuri while practising Samadhi at the time of his Vedantic Sadhana. He sharply pressed between my two eyebrows with his finger nail and said, "Now concentrate your mind on this painful sensation!" As a result I found I could concentrate easily on that sensation as long as I liked, and during that period I completely forgot the consciousness of the other parts of my body, not to speak of their causing any distraction in the way of my meditation.'

Narendra with his keen intellect, weighed the Master's words in a balance, as it were, criticized and tested them before accepting them. At the same time he could go deep into their meaning. We shall narrate a solitary instance which has a pertinent bearing on our theme. One day Sri Ramakrishna was discussing the tenets of the Vaishnavas. He recounted them to his devotees: relish for the name of God, compassion for all living creatures and service to the devotees of God. He related at some length what the meaning of the first tenet was, but coming to speak about compassion he was thrown into Samadhi. Returning to a semi-conscious state he said to himself, 'Compassion to creatures! Compassion to creatures! Thou fool. An insignificant worm crawling on earth, thou to show compassion to others! Who art thou to show compassion! No it cannot be. It is not compassion for others but rather service to man, recognising him to be the veritable manifestation of God.'

Coming out of the room, Naren said to his young friends, 'I have discovered a strange light in those wonderful words of the Master. How beautifully has he reconciled the ideal of Bhakti with the knowledge of the Vedanta, generally interpreted as hard, austere and inimical to human sentiments and emotions! What a grand, natural and sweet synthesis!' For a long time did he explain the meaning of those words and in the end said, 'If it is the will of God, the day will soon come when I shall proclaim this grand truth before the world at large. I shall make it the common property of all'. Thus did the Master prepare his disciple for the propagation of Vedanta.

Contact with the masses of India

For a time after the Master's passing away, outwardly it appeared as if all was over; but the seed of renunciation sown by the Master and the hankering for God-realization, that he had generated in the young hearts, were too enduring to be easily lost in the maze of the world. A monastery soon came into being, though in a dilapidated house, at Baranagore with the kind munificence of Surendranath Mitra, an ardent devotee of the Master. The young men gathered there plunged themselves in spiritual practices and scriptural studies. Days and months passed in this way. The fire of vairagya kindled by the Master kept on burning steadily and unabated, and Narendranath played a great part in

this process. He engaged them in talks of the days they had spent with the Master, revivifying their memories with the ecstatic joy of those days and urging them on in their spiritual practices, even though he himself was passing through a tornado of difficulties at his own home. When he had settled the affairs of the family at home and put the monastery in a shape, the urge to wander alone, depending solely on God, came upon him.

During his peregrinations he came in contact with the real India; India of the villages, the pure, simple, innocent folk, industrious yet grovelling in poverty, living in dirt and squalor, bearing their hard lot with a patience that was beyond imagination. This naked picture of penury and illiteracy pained him deeply, and stirred the very depths of his being. A stern resolve to do something to alleviate their misery goaded him from place to place. Having failed to rouse the sympathy of the rich of the country in their cause, he thought of seeking it elsewhere. Just at this time he heard of the Parliament of Religions that was being convened at Chicago and thought it the best medium through which he could approach and rouse the interest of the people of America in the masses of India. With the aid of a few friends he crossed over to America.

The Parliament of Religions and after

What transpired at the Parliament of Religions is an event well-known to all and needs no repetition here. Suffice it to say that, whatever may have been the motive of the convenors of the Parliament, it was undoubtedly established that Hinduism was in no respect inferior to any other religion; rather it was found to be the only religion which had from the earliest times showed toleration and acceptance of other religions. And that not in a patronising attitude, but as a true recognition of the different pathways to God. Who then was more competent to represent Hinduism than Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of a person who was, as it were, a Parliament of Religions in session, viz. Sri Ramakrishna? Nay, Sri Ramakrishna was a harmonious blend of them all. Was not Swami Vivekananda trained by the Master to look on all faiths as pathways to God? In Sri Ramakrishna he had seen no note of discord. Every type of aspirant came, discussed his religion, his difficulties, was enlightened and went with his vision broadened. The chosen disciple of the Master, Swami Vivekananda, was, therefore, pre-eminently fitted to appear and speak at that august assembly in the name of the 'mother of all religions'. And he did receive the acclamation and admiration of that cultured gathering when he addressed it. Over-night he became famous. Swami Vivekananda became, to quote one of their papers, a celebrity.

After the Parliament of Religions he toured the States of America from one end to the other, spreading the message of Vedanta, enlightening the people on the customs, manners and religion of the

Hindus, a race maligned without cause. A race whose only faults, if any, were that it was not aggressive and intolerant; that it never went to conquer or proselytise with the sword. Swami Vivekananda had to fight against the ignominious propaganda of his adversaries. A heart less pure and brave than that of Swamiji would have compromised or would have broken down in the face of such attacks. Swami Vivekananda stood like a rock while the calumniators beat themselves against it and were crushed. 'Truth will triumph,' was his calm and collected reply to those who wanted him to defend himself. And before long truth did triumph. This is how Swami Vivekananda suffered for the sake of India, Hinduism and the masses.

Application of Vedanta in practice

Now let us see why Swami Vivekananda, a monk that he was, took upon himself the so-called work of social regeneration, a work purely for the society to deal with. There were two reasons. First of all, the society was comatose and moribund. The English-educated of the society were turning to the West for enlightenment and aping them in their customs and costumes. They had lost faith in all that was native to the soil. What was left of such a society were some village superstitions and rigid caste rules. Could any good be expected out of such a society? Were then the poor and the downtrodden to be left to the mercy of such an unsympathetic society? Did not the Master enjoin them to serve man as a veritable manifestation of God? And when so many gods were trampled under the heels of autocracy and ground in the wheel of poverty, was he to keep quiet? How then would he be true to Sri Ramakrishna's teaching? What does even Vedanta teach? Do not the Upanisads declare, 'Verily all this is Brahman'¹, 'That Thou art'²? Were these highest truths of Vedanta then to remain only in books or as subjects for intellectual discussions? Swamiji never believed in such sophisticated statements as: this is philosophy and that is practice. To him religion was a practical science. It was his firm faith that the truths of Vedanta could be lived and should be lived. For, he had seen one, Sri Ramakrishna, who was the living embodiment of Vedanta philosophy. Enlightened, therefore, by the Master's interpretation of Vedanta and urged by his own noble heart, Swami Vivekananda strived to mitigate the misery of the poor. To the still doubting minds we like to recall Sri Ramakrishna's remonstrance of young Naren's cherishing the idea to work for individual salvation alone. Did not the Master express what he expected of him, in clear and unambiguous terms, when he said, 'I expect you to be like the banyan tree under which the weary travellers could rest'? What further testimony than this is necessary to show that it was Sri Ramakrishna's own will which was working through the Swami?

Again, uplifting of the masses may be social work in the eyes of those whose vistas of vision are cramped by mere body idea, who see

man only as a higher species of animal, a bundle of flesh. But for him they were divinities on earth. Let us see what Swami Vivekananda says of service to the poor and the stricken: 'The poor and the miserable are for our salvation so that we may serve the Lord coming in the shape of the diseased, coming in the shape of the lunatic, the leper and the sinner.' Besides there was the command by the Master to preach religion. To whom was he to preach it? To the hungry millions? There could be no mockery baser than that and he knew it well. So he said, 'Let the hungry get a morsel of food.' Who could fathom the anguish of that heart that bled for the poor of the country? He wanted to make Vedanta most practical. 'If you believed in a thing and did not try to practise it,' he said, 'why, that is hypocrisy, it is worse than atheism. At least the atheist is honest.' Swami Vivekananda was, therefore, moved to take up the regeneration of the masses not on humanitarian grounds, as some like to interpret it, but as a worship of the divine, the indwelling spirit, the essence of all beings.

Vedanta disabused

It is commonly believed that for the practice of Vedanta one has to divest oneself of all the tender feelings and sentiments of the heart. We do not know what led to this peculiar idea, but it is perfectly contrary to what has been recorded in history. Take for instance the life of Sri Sankara, the paragon of Vedanta philosophy in the past. If this was the ideal, why did he not confine himself to his own salvation? What made him wander on foot from one end of the country to the other? What axe of his own had he to grind? One has to admit that there was no other cause for him to do so except for the establishment of religion, a way of life that could give ultimate liberation. What higher compassion can there be than to feel for the liberation of the ignorant? The impression, that one had to be unfeeling, seems therefore to be based on insufficient grounds. Whatever might have been its origin and whatever might have been its necessity in the past, if there was any — about which we have grave doubts — in the present age this opinion has forfeited its right to exist. Swami Vivekananda was the first, in recent times, to disabuse Vedanta of this ill-fame.

Let us see for ourselves if this contention — Vedanta teaches one to be sympathetic — is at variance with the scriptures: What is the ultimate goal of Vedanta? Realizing one's own Self which is Brahman,³ Brahman which is the only Truth. 'This Universe is only Brahman,'⁴ and It is 'One without a second,'⁵ declare our Upanisads. Vedanta then teaches the Oneness of Reality. It also says, 'Perceive it through the mind that there are not many things at all, one who sees many goes from death to death.'⁶ Again take the famous passage of Svetasvatara Upanisad, 'Thou art the woman, Thou art the man, Thou art the boy, Thou art the girl. Thou art the old man tottering on the stick, Thou art that which manifests

in so many shapes.' ⁷ What religion expresses the divinity of all beings in such clear terms? Vedanta, therefore, does not teach us to turn into stock and stone.

This Oneness, that it teaches, alone makes for love; unless one recognises, at least intellectually in the beginning, the Oneness of all creatures, Vedanta is impossible of practice. And to attain this love, our feelings, our heart only can help us. Speaking on practical Vedanta, Swamiji stresses: 'It is through the heart that the Lord is seen and not through the intellect. The intellect is only the street cleaner, cleansing the path for us, a secondary worker, a policeman; but the policeman is not a positive necessity for the working of society. He is only to stop disturbances, to check wrong doing and that is all the work required of the intellect. . . . It is feeling that works, that moves with speed infinitely superior to that of Electricity or anything else. Do you feel? If you do, you will see the Lord. . . . It is the feeling that is the life, the strength, the vitality, without which no amount of intellectual activity can reach God.' Again he says, 'Intellect is like limbs without power of locomotion. It is only when feeling enters and gives them motion that they move and work on others.' Swamiji, therefore, here restates the Vedantic standpoint, only more effectively as he had direct access to such realizations.

Vedanta, basis of all Ethics

Another charge levelled against Hinduism in general by some Western writers is 'that it is quite impossible to find any real or vital principle of ethics,' in Vedic literature. This is not a fact, because the Vedic literature, from which we cannot exclude the Upanisads, is replete with texts which enunciate the ethical principles, based on which alone Manu and other sages have given out their law codes. This, the writers have conveniently overlooked and put out statements which are biased and presumptuous. If, on the other hand, this statement had any truth in it, how does one account for the emergence of so many saints and sages in the country? Can truth come out of falsehood? Can sin beget holiness? If at all any *sure* basis exists for ethics, it is only in Vedanta which teaches the Oneness of all life, all existence. Let us see what Swami Vivekananda says on the subject: 'The rational West is earnestly bent upon seeking out the rationality, the *raison d'etre* of all its philosophy and ethics; and you all know well that ethics cannot be derived from the mere sanction of any personage, however great and divine he may have been. Such an explanation of the authority of ethics appeals no more to the highest of the world's thinkers; they want something more than human sanction for ethical and moral codes to be binding, they want some eternal principle of truth as the sanction of ethics. And where is that eternal sanction to be found except in the only Infinite Reality, that exists in you and in me and in all, in the Self, in the Soul? The infinite oneness of the Soul is the eternal sanction of all morality, that you and I are not

only brothers, but that you and I are really one. This is the dictate of Indian philosophy. This oneness is the rationale of all ethics and all spirituality.' Repeatedly did he bring this fact to the notice of his audience. On one occasion he said, 'Why is it that every one says, "Do good to others"? Where is the explanation? Why is it that all great men have preached the brotherhood of mankind, and greater men the brotherhood of all lives? Because whether they were conscious of it or not, behind all that, through all their irrational and personal superstitions, was peering forth the eternal light of the Self denying all manifoldness, and asserting that the whole universe is but One.' Therefore the cause of Hinduism and Vedanta in this respect stands vindicated as anyone can see.

All these truths, however, were garbled and presented to the West by parties who wanted to advance their own cause in India. Hence it was required that a true picture of Indian Religion be presented not in mere word-pictures but in life. Swami Vivekananda by his immaculate life, wonderful realizations and great insight fulfilled the purpose. It was from that day that the queer ideas the West cherished about India began to disappear and Vedanta reached a wider circle. India, and for the matter of that the whole world, remains eternally grateful to the Swami.

¹ Chandogya Up., III.14.1.

² Ibid., VI.8.7.

³ Brihadaranyaka Up., II.5.19.

⁴ Mundaka Up., 2.2.12.

⁵ Chandogya Up., VI.2.1.

⁶ Katha Up., 4.11.

⁷ 4.3.