

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA- AN EXEMPLAR OF HIS TEACHINGS (*)

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Lives of great spiritual leaders are the best commentaries, the greatest illustrations of their own teachings. In them we find thought, speech and action working in consonance. As a popular Sanskrit verse elegantly puts it, 'the holy ones are one in mind, speech and action.' How simple this definition looks! But what a vast meaning is encompassed in it. As if in a sweep, it includes all the highest virtues man can conceive of. It means the inherence and manifestation of truthfulness, purity, sincerity, unselfishness, unbiased love and a score more of other virtues. It is a staggering list, no doubt, but that is the very reason that there are very rare souls that reach such dizzy heights of spiritual realization, such eminence. Sri Ramakrishna emphasized the need for 'making thought and word perfectly at one' as a discipline even for those who sought God in earnest. Swamiji writes to a disciple in Madras, 'Be holy and pure and the fire will come'. This was the keynote of all his teachings. Coming from Vivekananda these words had tremendous effect. They carried his vigour and enthused puissance into the reader. They were not mere words of encouragement but the products of the faith and conviction born of his own experience. He was never tired of repeating this formula, whether it was in conversations, dialogues or letters, to impress upon his audience the primacy of cultivating these virtues. In one of his letters he remarks, 'Be pure, staunch and sincere to the very backbone, and everything will be all right. If you have marked anything in the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna it is this — they are sincere to the backbone'.¹

Place of Truth

And on what a high pedestal Swamiji did place truth! It was to him, as with his Master, the very foundation of spiritual life. 'Be not discouraged, one word of truth can never be lost; for ages it may be hidden under rubbish but it will show itself sooner or later. Truth is indestructible, virtue is indestructible, purity is indestructible,'² writes Swamiji in a letter to a disciple, with a certitude that can pierce through granite and cleave through all doubts. How was he able to do it? Because he was himself full of truth and nothing but that. Truth was with him a natural possession from his very childhood, and all through his life we see him struggling and fighting for it. One such urge brought him to Sri

Ramakrishna and what marvellous effect it has produced in the world of thought and action, both in the East and the West! Yet this is but the beginning.

To get a little extended view of Swamiji's life we shall follow him through his peregrinations, through his travels in the foreign lands and just take an instance or two to learn how passionately attached to truth he was. sometimes at the risk of even estrangement from his best friends. We refer the reader to a letter written to Miss Mary Hale on 1st February, 1895, wherein he mentions about an excited argument he had with a Presbyterian gentleman. 'Who,' he writes 'as usual got very hot, angry and abusive'. He continues, 'I was afterwards severely reprimanded by Mrs. Bull for this, as such things hinder my work. So it seems, is your opinion'. Both of these ladies were his staunchest supporters and well-meaning friends, but where truth was concerned he was no respecter of persons. Let us quote his own words, 'I know full well how good it is for one's worldly prospects to be sweet. I do everything to be *sweet*, but when it comes to a horrible compromise with the truth within, I then stop. ... I believe in Samadarsitvam — same state of mind with regard to all. The duty of the ordinary man is to obey the commands of his "God", society, but the children of light never do so. This is an eternal law.... The worshippers of "Vox populi" go to annihilation in a moment—the children of truth *live for ever*.'

It is no doubt true that the path of truth is not strewn with flowers, but a spiritual leader comes not to cater to the whims and fancies of a society and allow it to run to its ruin. He has a mission to fulfil — that of drawing society up towards him. The spiritual leaders know the hollowness of wealth, beauty, name and fame. So they resent and fight falsehood and expose it. They *know* that truth alone triumphs—not believe but *know*. Swamiji compares 'truth to a corrosive substance of infinite power. It burns its way in wherever it falls—in soft substance at once, hard granite slowly, but it must.' Continuing his letter he writes: 'I am so sorry, Sister, that I cannot make myself sweet and accommodating to every black falsehood. But I cannot. I have suffered for it all my life, but I cannot. I have essayed and essayed. But I cannot. At last I have given it up. The Lord is great. . . God of Truth; be Thou alone my guide! . . .What reason is there for me to conform to the vagaries of the world around me and not obey the voice of Truth within?'³ That is what Swami Vivekananda symbolizes — Truth. Let us not think that after this correspondence either Miss Mary Hale or after the 'fight', as Swamiji calls it, Mrs. Bull, lost any regard, respect or admiration for Swamiji. On the other hand they stood by him till the end. Many were such instances in the life of Swamiji. But he never gave in. His mind instinctively recoiled from untruth.

Unselfishness

Now what did Swamiji mean by 'fire' in the sentence quoted above? It is the fire, the vigour, enthusiasm and energy to plunge undaunted into action, a determination to face all odds or die, for a noble cause. It is the fire of holiness and unselfishness which can achieve wonders. Swamiji declared on another occasion: 'But mind you, this is life's experience: if you really want the good of others, the whole universe may stand against you and cannot hurt you. It must crumble before your power of the Lord Himself in you, if you are sincere and really unselfish.'⁴ He urged his followers to be totally unselfish. He used to quote often a Sanskrit verse which runs in the following strain: 'The wise one should give up wealth and even life for the sake of others. When death is certain, it is better to die for a good cause'. For, he said, that is the true way to make best use of our human life. Once when Ingersol said to Swamiji, 'I believe in making the most of the world, in squeezing the orange dry, because this world is all we are sure of.' Swamiji replied: 'I know a better way to squeeze the orange of this world than you do and I get more out of it. . . . I know there is no fear, so I enjoy the squeezing. I have no duty, no bondage of wife and children and property. I can love all men and women. Every one is God to me. Think of the joy of loving man as God! Squeeze your orange this way, and get ten thousand fold more out of it. Get every single drop.'⁵

Mark the words 'believe' used by Ingersol and 'know' used by Swamiji. Whereas the former speaks from the plane of the five senses and is not sure of the outcome, Swamiji is emphatic and certain, having been vouchsafed the vision of the Divine in everything long long before, at the feet of his Master. So the words that came out of his lips were from the innermost core of his being and had the stamp of authority.

Another time Swamiji declared: 'To be unselfish, perfectly selfless, is salvation itself for the man within dies, and God alone remains.' Here are the words of a sage, a seer, very clear and unambiguous and at the same time apparently showing an easy path to salvation. But it is to be worked out. Man must be intensely and motivelessly working for others, with not a thought of what will happen to himself. He himself did it. One of his American friends remarks: 'He did not seem to be conscious of himself at all. It was the other man who interested him.' Out of the fullness of the heart Swamiji spoke: 'You little know how nothing would be impossible for you in life if you labour day and night for others with your heart's blood! 'Again, he prophesies: 'Our best work is done, our greatest influence is exerted, when we are without thought of self.'

Love of humanity

But to be 'unselfish, perfectly selfless' we require a better basis than the mere exercise of the intellect. We should have the heart, the feeling,

the love of humanity. Swamiji had it in ample measure and that was what sent him to America, to seek means to ameliorate the condition of the suffering masses of India. He had failed to get any response from the rich of his own country in this direction, and was struggling, as it were, in the jaws of death. He panted for direction from on High and when the anguish reached the climax, the command came. For him religiousness was not making long faces, nor was it looking down on others. 'Love and charity for the whole human race, that is the test of true religiousness,' he stated. Let us not jump to the conclusion that we have this in abundance. Swamiji was aware of this fault of man and warned us against this self-complacency. He observes: 'I do not mean the sentimental statement that all men are brothers, but that one must feel the oneness of human life.' Many are ready to accommodate their brother as long as everything goes their way, as long as the brother does not cross their path. But as soon as their least interest is affected, woe unto the brother! This is not loving humanity. It is pure selfishness masquerading in the form of charity. Swamiji reiterates that no society in any country has come to that excellence 'where the effectiveness of individual self-sacrifice for the good of the many and oneness of purpose and endeavour actuating every member of the society for the common good of the whole, has been realized.' Let there be no misgivings about it. It can be done by a few, and the persons on whom God's choice falls must consider themselves blessed. There is no room for pride about it. Swamiji decisively points out: 'All are helped on by nature, and will be so helped even though millions of us were not here. The course of nature will not stop for such as you and me; it is only a blessed privilege to you and to me that we are allowed, in the way of helping others, to educate ourselves. . . . So drive out of your mind the idea that you have to do something for the world; the world does not require any help from you. It is sheer nonsense on the part of any man to think that he is born to help the world; it is simply pride, it is selfishness insinuating itself in the form of virtue.'⁶ He was himself humble to the end.

An incident in the life of the Swami that occurred at the Belur Math in the year 1901 shows his love for the poor, in a touching way. Some Santal labourers were working at the Math premises then. Swamiji used to visit them and hear their tales of woe. Sometimes tears would come to the Swami's eyes when he heard them and then the narrator would stop his tale, entreat Swamiji to go away. One day while Swamiji was talking with them some people of wealth and position came to see him. When he was told about the visitors, he said, 'I shan't be able to go now. I am quite happy with these people.' Another day he arranged to feed them with sweets and delicacies and when they had eaten to their satisfaction, Swamiji turned to a disciple and said, 'I actually saw the Lord Himself in them. How simple-hearted and guileless they are! 'And a little later addressing the Sannyasins and Brahmacharis of the Math he observed: 'See how simple-hearted these poor illiterate people are! Can you

mitigate their misery a little? If not of what use is your wearing the gerua? . . . Alas! Nobody in our country thinks of the low, the poor and the miserable!' With the knowledge of history of the countries of the East and the West as background he prophetically remarked, 'Unless they (the masses) are raised, this motherland of ours will never awake.' 'You will be free in a moment, if you starve yourself to death by giving to another. If you will be perfect, you will become God,' said he on another occasion.

Purity of motive and sincerity of conviction

The motive power to work for humanity comes with renunciation, not merely outer, but inner also. There must not be any ulterior end in view at any time, prior, during or at the end of the work. That is purity of motive. This will not come unless sincere conviction, that the path chosen is sure to lead us to the goal, arises. Incidentally, we may point out, that sincerity of conviction and purity of motive form the groundwork of any other pathway, to spirituality, as well. Swamiji warns: 'Keep away from all insincere claimants to supernatural illumination.' Aye, that is the great hurdle that comes in spiritual life. We like to attain results quickly and without effort. Is it possible? No. But man is man. He knows it is impossible yet runs after the miraculous and the like. But those who are sincere, have the assurance of all the Great Ones, to which Swamiji too joins his voice: 'Truth, purity and unselfishness — wherever these are present, there is no power below or above the sun to crush the possessor thereof.' Is it not a reflection of his own life ?

Chastity

'Chastity in thought, word, and deed, always, and in all conditions,' said Swamiji, 'is what is called Brahmacharya.' Than Swamiji there can be no better authority to speak on the value of chastity. He was pure as purity can be. Sri Ramakrishna said of him that he was like a blazing fire. The Master said, 'Maya stood ten steps away from Naren. She could not catch him in her net.' Let us, therefore, hear Swamiji's opinion about this virtue: 'It is only the chaste man or woman who can make the Ojas rise and store it in the brain, that is why chastity has always been considered the highest virtue.' 'Without chastity there can be no spiritual strength. Continence gives wonderful control over mankind. The spiritual leaders of men have been very continent, and this is what gave them power.' Referring to his plan of education he said, 'It is *gurugrihavasā*, living with the teacher that I would prescribe,' for that meant a life of celibacy. 'Everybody should be trained to practise absolute Brahmacharya and then only faith and shraddha will come. . . . Simply by the observance of strict Brahmacharya (continence) all learning can be mastered in a very short time. One has an unfailing memory of what one hears or knows but once.

It is owing to this want of continence that everything is on the brink of ruin in our country,' remarked Swamiji on various occasions. Will the nation heed? It would be the best way of honouring Swamiji if it did. For it is the working out of his ideas, and not his name, that he liked to see.

Swamiji's personality

Commissioned by Divine Providence to preach the gospel of Vedanta, of tolerance, of spirituality he, it is hardly necessary to state, was well-equipped with all these and more. We have seen here, in a few of his teachings that we have discussed, that he never taught anything that he himself had not practised. As in the case of these teachings so too was he an exemplar in the love of God, and other virtues that he asked us to cultivate. This can be observed by anyone who cares to go through his life. We shall now conclude by a reference to the remarks of those, specially from the critical West, who had the opportunity to come in close contact with him.

Swamiji's personality was imposing and impressive. He had a regal bearing and a casual observer would take him to be a Rajah (a Prince). Here is a news item from the *Framingham Tribune*, which has recently been brought to light; it reads:

Friday, August 25, 1893.

Holliston: Miss Kate Sanborn, who has recently returned from the West, last week entertained the Indian Rajah, Swami Vivekananda. Behind a pair of horses furnished by liveryman F. W. Phipps, Miss Sanborn and the Rajah drove through town on Friday en route for Hunnewell's.⁷

This news item, appearing in a journal of a remote town, has its own importance and significance; and more so when it happens that Swamiji had not yet attained the fame and celebrity, which, after the Parliament of Religions, was his. This proves that his was a personality that could not be hidden.

It is also interesting to note that he left deep, abiding and loving memories with whomsoever he came in contact. Witness Mrs. Wright's letter to her mother which has recently come to light:

Annisquam, Mass.
August 29, 1893.

"Dear Mother,

We have been having a queer time. Kate Sanborn had a Hindoo monk in tow as I believe I mentioned in my last letter. John went down to meet him in Boston and missing him, invited him up here. He came Friday! In a long saffron robe that caused universal amazement. He was a

most gorgeous vision. He had a superb carriage of the head, was very handsome in an oriental way, about thirty years old in time, ages in civilization. He stayed until Monday and was one of the most interesting people I have yet come across. We talked all day all night and began again with interest next morning. The town was in a fume to see him; the boarders at Miss Lane's in wild excitement. They were in and out of the Lodge constantly and little Mrs. Merrill's eyes were blazing and her cheeks red with excitement. Chiefly we talked religion. It was a kind of revival, I have not felt so wrought up for a long time myself! Then on Sunday John had him invited to speak in the Church and they took up a collection for a Heathen College to be carried on on strictly heathen principles — whereupon I retired to my corner and laughed until I cried.'⁸

Here are given the circumstances that brought Prof. J. H. Wright and Swamiji together. How this meeting helped Swamiji, to get entry into the Parliament of Religions as a delegate, is a matter of history too well-known to need repetition. But mark the impression left by Swamiji during that short visit.

We shall now quote from a letter of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, journalist and poet, to Mrs. Kate Tannatt Woods who had sometime played hostess to Swamiji. Of course this letter is of a later date (May, 1895) but it shows how the correspondent, who was one among the audience of Swamiji, felt about his personality. She writes:

'I was listening to Vivekananda this morning an hour. How honoured by fate you must feel to have been allowed to be of service to this Great Soul. I believe him to be the reincarnation of some great Spirit — perhaps Buddha — perhaps Christ! He is so simple — so sincere, so pure, so unselfish. To have listened to him all winter is the greatest privilege life has ever offered me. It would be surprising to me that people could misunderstand or malign such a soul if I did not know how Buddha and Christ were persecuted and lied about by small inferiors. His discourse this morning was most uplifting — his mere presence is that. His absolute sinking of self is what I like.'⁹

How enormously he should have touched the deep chords of their hearts to make them spontaneously pour out their adorations and encomiums on him! What a divine joy should have been brimming in their hearts to make them desire to share it with others! Yet speech is but a poor messenger of the heart. If even that sends a thrill through one's being, how greater should have been the feelings aroused in those hearts! One can feel it only when one comes across such a holy one. As words and descriptions can carry little meaning of what an ocean is, so too these letters convey but a faint echo of the resurrection of those hearts. Perhaps one can imagine it a little. But imageries will fall far far short of the real feeling. The magnitude of the spiritual benefit one can receive by

a sight, a touch or communion with such spiritual luminaries is unfathomable. These letters, which form but a fraction of the few that have come to light, are living evidences of the soothing influence, like that of a cool mountain breeze, his sublime life breathed wherever he happened to be; nay even more, wherever his message spread. His life, like those of others of his eminence are verifications of the scriptural statements. These lives reiterate the scriptures and reimburse them with energy and vigour.

Finally let us reproduce from what Miss Sarah Farmer, the founder of the summer School for the Comparative Study of Religions, at Green Acre, wrote to the Vedanta Society of New York about the year 1902, after the passing away of Swamiji:

‘To know Swami Vivekananda was a renewed consecration; to have him under one’s roof was to feel empowered to go forth to the children of men and to help them all to a realization of their birthright as Sons of God. What Green Acre owes to him cannot be put into words. A little band of people had started to prove the providing care of God for those who only rely upon Him in utter faith and love. This great soul came into our midst and did more than any other to give to the work its true tone, for he lived every day the truth which his lips proclaimed and was to us the living evidence of the power manifested nineteen hundred years ago, in that he went about his Father’s business in perfect joyousness and childlike trust, without “purse or script” and found all promises fulfilled, all needs met. Forever after, as he grew in knowledge and power, his influence increased among us and helped to strengthen our faith, and today his power for good is even greater and will continue to be, if we are true to Him who worketh in us “to will and to do His good pleasure”.’¹⁰

Such then was Swami Vivekananda, an embodiment of the highest virtues he preached.

¹ Works, Vol.V,p.44 Epistles.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.,p. 56,57.

⁴ Ibid. Vol.VIII, p.83, ‘My Life and Mission.’

⁵ Works, Vol. VII, p.75, Inspired Talks.

⁶ Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 87-88.

⁷ Swami Vivekananda in America, New Discoveries by Marie Louise Burke, pub. Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, page 16.

⁸ Ibid., page 20.

⁹ Ibid., page 29.

¹⁰ The Brahmavadin, January, 1903, pages 56-57.