

Swami Vivekananda's Anguish

PRAVRAJIKA VIVEKAPRANA

While speaking of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita says (in *'The Master as I Saw Him'*), "There was one thing deep in the Master's nature, that he himself never knew how to adjust. This was his love of his country and his resentment of her suffering. Throughout the years in which I saw him almost daily, the thought of India was to him like the air he breathed."

Vivekananda had undertaken the bridging of the East and the West and that task seemed to go against the basic Indian idea of spirituality. It was the organizing capability of the West that he wanted to introduce in India, both in education and religion. Of his many disciples, Sister Nivedita was the one whom Swamiji considered fit to work in India, for the women's education. "I have plans for the women of my country in which you, I think, could be of great help to me", he said to Sister Nivedita, when

he met her in England. To him, the education of the women of India was one of the most important tasks, which his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, had entrusted to him. And he was very keen to find a woman who could be of help to him in this endeavour. When Sister Nivedita showed eagerness to come to India and help him, he welcomed her.

However, when she presented herself on arriving in Calcutta in 1898, she saw that there was great conflict in his mind. She had seen him in a different light in England. At that time she had not understood the depth of his struggle to revive Indian civilization from the degradation that had taken place due to various historical causes. One of these causes was the British domination of India. Vivekananda was a *sannyasin*, a monastic, and thus traditionally, was not supposed

to be involved in social problems of a society. But he had realized that without rejuvenating society, there was no way in which the spirituality of ancient India could be revived.

In her candid writings of *'The Master as I Saw Him'*, Sister Nivedita gives her readers an insight into "The Conflict of Ideals". As she says, "In the West, the Swami had revealed himself to us as a religious teacher

only.... It was as an apostle of Hinduism, not as a worker for India, that we saw the Swami in the West.... From the moment of my landing in India, however, I found something quite unexpected underlying all this... It was the personality of my Master himself, in all the fruitless torture and struggle of a lion caught in a net. For, from the day that he met me at



Sister Nivedita and Swami Vivekananda

the ship's side, till the last serene moment, when, at the hour of cow-dust he passed out of this village of this world, leaving the body behind, like a folded garment, I was always conscious of this element inwoven with the other, in his life."

Again and again, Sister Nivedita questioned, where did this struggle lie? Where did this sense of being, "baffled and thwarted" come from? What exactly was the struggle due to? "Was it the terrible effort of translating what he has called the 'super-conscious' into the common life? Undoubtedly he had been born to a task which was in this respect of heroic difficulty."

While describing 'His doubt of the present', Nivedita has explained that, long prior to this moment, Swamiji had defined the mission of the Order of Ramakrishna, as that of realizing and exchanging the highest ideals of the East and the West. But it was inevitable that he himself should from time to time go through the anguish of revolt... "Has anyone realized the pain endured by the sculptor of a new ideal?"

In India, traditionally, spirituality meant that you left society and wandered and meditated in the singular quest to find God. But he wanted a combination of the best of the East and the best of the West, which meant that he was trying to chisel a marble to a new kind of sculpture... and that was taking its toll. What he had undertaken actually frightened him, and as Nivedita says, in his passive moments, when he thought about it or reflected on it, he started having doubts. He doubted whether it was actually possible and whether he could do it. He was entirely alone in this thinking; even his brother disciples did not understand or support him, to begin with. It was

therefore, a terrible task that he had undertaken. "Nothing in this world is so terrible as to abandon the safe paths of accepted ideals, in order to work out some new realisation, by methods apparently in conflict with the old," says Sister Nivedita.

Even when he was brutally criticised, he insisted that this change or shift in outlook was necessary. He believed that the more the opposition, the more would be the power that comes up. I wouldn't even say it was 'doubt'. I would say it was the awareness of the enormity of the task that he had undertaken, and that he was left alone to do it, that was overwhelming.

Where Do We Stand Today?

The West had very new ideas, which even today, we don't really understand. Though we are imitating, and there is a lot of the 'West' in India, we don't understand what exactly they tried to prove as in contrast to what the ancient Indian mind tried to assert. These two threads are very difficult to weave together and if it is left to the unconscious or subconscious mind to do it, there is chaos... as we can see today. We do not understand how exactly we are supposed to tie these threads together without losing the sense of propriety and by holding on to the real meaning. This is a personal challenge, for each of us. Hardly anyone wants to take up the challenge. For Swamiji it was that much of a greater challenge because he was introducing this merging of threads very consciously and at the very grass-root level of Indian society.

Right now there is tremendous transition and confusion. The deepest reaction is coming from fundamentalist

religion, where, in the name of religion, people are ready to kill the 'other'. Everyone may not be actually 'killing', but there is resistance all the same. This resistance is unconscious or subconscious. The younger generations are completely out of their depth. That is leading to depression on the one hand and frenzy on the other. The *rajoguna* (the desire to rise above passivity) is connected with greed, ambition, and frenzy and when that momentum is over, it will automatically lead to depression, which means falling to the *tamasic* level (the state of inertia), as it is the outcome of living at an unthinking, superficial level. The present tendency, to give up, shows that the human mind is not ready to face reality as it is. The ability to motivate oneself to move on is inherent in every creature, but due to the lack of any understanding of life itself, the motivation of facing challenges is missing. This level of ignorance leads to self-destruction along with the destruction of the 'other'. The 'rage' that we are throwing at each other, is the result of this tendency to 'self-destruction'.

The Rising of the Unconscious

All these extreme reactions are coming from the unconscious. If we go to the root cause we will understand why Swamiji tried to bridge the East and West. This decision was not from his conscious level either. The 'bridge' has come from the Mother of the Universe in the form of Universal Energy. She wants these currents to meet and show the next level of civilization. Swamiji provided the spark for the flames to spread. Being obsessed with the superficial and outer levels is blinding everyone. If we want a wide-angle

point of view we need to understand and only then can we remain motivated to take the correct steps.

Advaita Vedanta, which Swamiji gave to the West as a means of comprehending and dealing with the problems of this Age, tells us to first understand, and only after that can we move forward with faith and activity. At least intellectually, we need to find the relevance of causation to modern-day problems. If we opt out of society then it is a different situation. But, can we opt out? How many people can move out of society? Merely running away or using religion or spirituality as an escape route is not a conscious 'moving out'. As long as we are within society we need a wide-angle point of view, which will come with reflection, otherwise we feel crushed and confused. That confusion leads to rage or depression. Each individual has to choose the path, within society, but with understanding so that we don't look at life from the narrow, selfish perspective. The need to find that bridge and see the connection is important.

As Swamiji said to Nivedita, "Maybe I too am caught in the glare of this flashlight of your modern civilization, which is only for a moment...I have become entangled." We are all in that web today as we try to bridge the gap between the two civilizations of the East and West. We can perceive the resistance and the struggle. The flash of light is attractive to us but we do not know how to proceed. The masses rising from one form of thinking and way of life, attracted by the flashes of light from another culture, and wanting to adopt that life, are naturally aggressive and ready to 'kill' for that. On the other hand the followers of traditional religions, perceive

the influences of opening up of points of view, riding on the waves of scientific discoveries as 'evil', and they react. There are reactions from all sides. These uprisings are inevitable, and then alone can we choose our paths so that our lives are meaningful. The mental and physical attitudes cannot be separated, and that seems to be the endeavour of the modern-day people.

The East and the West have to understand each other; whether we do it consciously or subconsciously, it has to be done. This is the desire of the Mother of the Universe. It is a kind of force that is rising everywhere – on the one hand there is the need to bridge the gap and on the other hand we do not know how to do this so that it does not become harmful or destructive. This turbulence of today has to rise so that the 'poison' is thrown out and a new level of understanding emerges. Almost a new global civilization has to emerge.

There are no individual problems here; this disharmony and discord that we see around us is a universal problem, although we may perceive it as localized when individuals here and there are the targets. But the problem is global. And in this Age the answer comes to us from Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

Swamiji wanted an Order that

would fulfil the individual's spiritual quest and at the same time stay in an organized manner so as to give support to society. But to harmonize the two paths was the challenge. Nivedita says, "Often dogged by a sense of failure, often overtaken by loathing of the limitations imposed alike by the instrument and the material, he dared less and less as years went on, to make determinate plans, or to dogmatize about the unknown."

Vivekananda often said, "What do we know?"

Mother uses it all for we are only fumbling about." This means trying to recognize that there is a Power, a force, which knows, and we don't know. Or we cannot know. That 'not knowing' is torture for a mind like Swamiji's. In a lesser degree it is a torture for us also but we do not have that acute sense of failure,

because what we want to achieve, our ideal, is never as extreme. The semi-darkness or semi-light, which a person like Swamiji perceived, as he came down from the highest level of inwardness was in itself a torture because he had to come down to the ordinary level so as to be in touch with this world. Otherwise, he could not possibly explain to the world what his teacher had himself demonstrated. Sri Ramakrishna did not explain anything. He made statements. It was left to Swamiji to explain.



The Ramakrishna Order

This basic Hindu urge to go away and realize God, still exists. But Swamiji set up the Order believing that the goal had changed. He was trying to make the people aware that this is a New Age and it demands a change in every way. For the monastics he wanted an Order with the goal of Service of God in Man; of 'Work is Worship'. For the householder it was to look beyond oneself and one's small world of family, and perceive the condition of everyone around, with the spirit of sacrifice.

The impulse came from Sri Ramakrishna. The impulse is from what he says, that we have to serve 'Jiva as Shiva'. That is the impulse that Swamiji was following and he wanted to give it shape and reality through an 'organization', as otherwise it would not be possible. Till that time, those who renounced social life and walked away, thought only of themselves and of their goal of God-realization. He wanted to give such a structure to the organization that would consider work and service as the *sadhana* and the highest goal. This was, at that point of time, a very revolutionary concept for India. The idea that this is what will lead human beings to the ultimate freedom is very difficult to understand. And it is equally difficult to make it practical with the attitude of action or karma as a path to freedom. It isn't as if work is supposed to have any other goal than individual and social evolution! Approaching everything with an attitude of *tapasya* has to be the mind-set of every person, as that is the only way that society moves forward. This was the goal that Swamiji perceived because in this day and age, isolation is not feasible for the

majority. It is next to impossible to practice in complete isolation. It may be possible for a few rare people but by and large it is not. Everyone needs some support system. Again, this is in the context of this Age because the faith in God has gone. There was a time when people could completely isolate themselves, go into caves and mountains with the faith that they had a connection with a greater Power and their goal was this search.

Swamiji wanted to follow that impulse and give it an organized form. But an organized form depends on the people who have to run the organization... and as Sister Nivedita indicates, his brother disciples weren't very happy with this idea. They had their own ideas, which were mainly to continue with the worship of Sri Ramakrishna and with pursuing individual practices for God-realization. While one was content observing all rituals, another was almost an atheist; another was logical and rational... and so on. It was therefore difficult to gather all such minds and make them believe that they had to come together to run an organization, and to believe that the highest ideal for this Age was 'work is worship'. This kind of service could of course only come from those who cherished a great love for humanity... and Swamiji was full of this love.

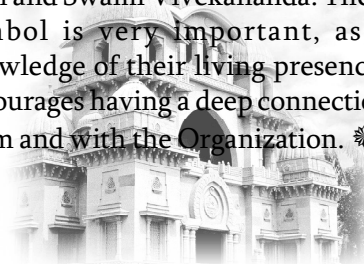
Work itself gives concentration if it is carried out with an attitude of sacrifice and with the view of Service of God in Man. The Indian word is *ekagrata*, meaning one-pointedness, on the work or activity, which gives us that concentration...but behind all that is the living ideal, or personality, which inspires us. If that does not happen then it is very hard. This Age demands this kind of *tapasya*.

We have legends in our mythology, of the Earth crying and suffering and appealing to Lord Vishnu to come down and relieve her. Psychologically, this Age demands that 'relief'. From the depth of Divinity, something rises in the human form and shows us how to live in this Age. Unfortunately though, the majority is not ready. And because of that an organization became a necessity. There had never been such an organization before. This new idea, that the common people could have an opportunity to come forward and work with the organization for the good of society, not with an attitude of doing charity but as part of their individual *sadhana*, is psychologically revolutionary. Sri Ramakrishna asserted that all paths reach the same goal; that any activity can help us to evolve, so long as we realize that our birth is meant for a deep purpose. It is not to be frittered away, and there are many options of how we can achieve the final goal.

An incarnation comes only when there is a new wave or idea to be broadcast, otherwise why would He come? Sri Ramakrishna is not just another manifestation of the Divine for the sake of itself; He is an incarnation for the Age. If we study the life of any incarnation, including Jesus Christ and the Buddha, we find that they are responding to a particular demand of the Age. It is amazing how even today, many people in India have great interest or fascination in singing and chanting and reciting the scriptures, and following the rituals of worship, but they do not have the same interest in the message of Swami Vivekananda—of the attitude of service as a way of worship. And this is what Sister Nivedita is bringing out in her observations of her Master.

People don't want to leave the old path, as that seems easier. So for a *sadhu* or a monastic person, it may seem that walking out of society and then living for himself or herself, and trying to evolve in his or her personal journey is relatively easier than being part of an organization and dedicating himself or herself to the service of others. Similarly, for the common people, following the traditional methods of religion, worship, and living their lives enclosed in their own narrow point of view within the family is far easier than looking at the wide-angle view and developing an attitude of service and sacrifice with society in mind. This change is in life itself, whether within the monastic order or within the family life in society. Sri Ramakrishna did not come just for his disciples and the Order. He came for the ordinary individual, and it is up to the individual to understand what is demanded of him or her. This organization was created so that those who joined it, and those who were connected with it from the outside, found a common ground of communication. Everyone needs some support system. The real understanding and practice today is within society.

Finally, if one has to believe that all activity is individual *sadhana* and that one has to work for the good of all, and that alone is our *tapasya*, and if we have some ideals in front of us, then it is very inspiring. The Order gives us these ideals, Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. The visible symbol is very important, as is the knowledge of their living presence. That encourages having a deep connection with them and with the Organization. ❀



Practical Vedanta in Everyday Life

GITANJALI MURARI

If you were to ask anyone if they would like to be masters of their destiny, the answer most likely will be an emphatic 'yes.' If you ask anyone if they would like to be rid of their fears and anxieties, the answer would again be 'yes'. Unknowingly and unintentionally, our response echoes the call of our eternal true nature which is ever free, blissful and wise. This true nature constantly drives us to desire that 'freedom' in myriad ways through the pursuit of our worldly goals, hounded by worries and fears.

We hear many people recall their childhood days wistfully, wishing that they had never grown up to face the adult world. It is true that our childhood is the most carefree time of our life. It is the time we are closest to our eternal true nature but somehow, while growing up and acquiring worldly wisdom, we lose that sense of unshackled freedom and become bound. And the bonds hold us so tightly, that we actually come to believe that this is the 'natural' way to be, the 'natural' way for every adult to function and that our 'foolish' childhood is only a pleasant memory to be remembered every once in a while with a nostalgic sigh.

The Power of Truth

Vedanta cuts through the thick fog

of our adult beliefs and takes us back to the essence of our childhood, that is, to our eternally free nature. In doing so, we not only break all bondages but also discover that we are masters and not slaves. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "The world is for us...not we for the world..." We do not 'become' free, we are free. We do not 'become' masters of our destiny, we are masters of our destiny. Once this realization imprints



itself on our minds, we begin to function from a higher level of consciousness. We begin to glimpse the infinite potential within us and whatever we then set out to do is accomplished

beautifully, in the right spirit, with the right attitude setting us free.

Hence, the main purpose of Vedanta is to help us discover our true nature and set us free from ignorance. Many of us would hesitate to be 'set free' especially if we have good fortune smiling at us! What! Am I to give up all this fun? This is the first thought that will cross our minds. However, if we reflect on our lives, we will find that having given the powers to external forces around us, we have turned ourselves into bound slaves. If lady luck favours us, we think that life is wonderful but when misfortune walks in at the door, we plunge into misery. Such is the state of a mind that is immersed in ignorance, that

is, not free. When we do practice Vedanta daily in our lives and gradually begin to bring our mind under our control, then the real fun begins! As Sri Ramakrishna has said, 'the world is a mansion of mirth...'

The General may win the battle
The King may subdue his kingdom
But he who rules his own mind
Is the greatest of them all!

Vedanta can be practiced either through one or more or all of the Yogas, depending on one's inclination and aptitude. The goal is to reach the rich repository of knowledge within us, anyhow. The path of devotion and complete surrender to God is Bhakti Yoga. In this Yoga, we realize that God is our very own, our true family, our all in all. Once somebody asked Swami Vivekananda that if God is our very own, why is it that we cannot see him. Swamiji asked him if he could see his own eyes. The person responded in the negative. Swamiji replied that God is closer to us than our eyes and that is why we cannot see him. It is only in the pure mind and heart that God reveals himself. But he is there with us, his grace ever flowing. Once this realization is firmly established in our minds, we begin to function as instruments of God, as his servants or his children. Every thought, every desire that arises in our minds, we as His instruments, turn it into His wish thus transforming everything into

worship. Everyday actions like waking up, bathing, cooking, eating when done as service to God or as His wish, converts daily activities into worship. Interacting with friends, family or colleagues also becomes worship as we interact with them with the attitude of serving them as per God's wish. Then, when everything is God's wish, it is impossible for worries and anxieties to beset us. Negative emotions gradually begin to lose their hold on our minds and each day turns into a pleasant experience of worshipful service.

Sister Nivedita, the celebrated disciple of Swami Vivekananda, had taken the decision on her first visit to Calcutta that she would open a school there for the upliftment of girls from the weaker sections of society. Swamiji, of course, was very supportive but much to Nivedita's chagrin seemed to be opposing every idea and methodology she proposed. Since Nivedita herself was a well-known educationist from England, she was at first unable to grasp Swamiji's point of view. They argued day in and day out till Nivedita understood what Swamiji had been telling her over and over again – that she could not 'uplift' anyone but Nivedita could certainly serve the girls by providing education. Nivedita realized that in setting up the school in a spirit of service as exhorted by her master, she would remain free from pride and thus be able to work from the higher consciousness of love and compassion.



Applying Vedanta

There are different paths to the supreme truth. In following Bhakti Yoga, the mind is withdrawn from serving the self and directed towards serving others as worship to God. This helps in steadying the mind while effacing the ego. In a steady mind that is not focused on its own self, discrimination begins to emerge. Hence, even when faced with difficult situations, the ego or self does not come into play. Instead, one utters words of wisdom keeping the larger benefit in mind and acts for the larger good. This service has its own sweet reward – actions performed as God’s instrument instill a sense of joy and freedom previously known to us only in our childhood. This is because the burden of responsibility has shifted from us to God! Everything is His work and His wish hence He knows best how He wants it done. Now even the result or the fruits of the actions performed by us do not bind us, neither through the sense of ego that ‘I have achieved this’ nor through anxiety for the outcome. If the outcome of our actions is good, we enjoy it as God’s instrument and if the outcome is not good, we remain unconcerned as God’s instrument. It is Thou, not I. You are the Doer, I am the instrument becomes the constant refrain.

A glowing example to this attitude is the devotional consecration witnessed in Nivedita’s life. The attitude with which Nivedita achieved all that she did in India is well put by the great nationalist Bipin Chandra Pal : “Nivedita came to us as no European has yet come, not as an adept, but as a novice; not as a teacher, but as a

learner. She did not pose before us as a prophetess but always stood in sincere love and reverence as a worshipper.”

As in the case of work, so also the same principle applies to relationships. When we approach each relationship in the spirit of service, as instruments of God, then we must necessarily pause before reacting. This makes us responsive since we have to think of the good of the other rather than what would satisfy us. This is a little difficult to practice at first especially if we have been in the habit of being reactionary. But as we mentally bow down to God and remind ourselves that we are his instruments, it gradually becomes easier. This is a wonderful practice for not only does it teach us self-control, it also creates a pleasant environment around us. We are able to handle difficult situations with relative ease; where an *impasse* seems impossible to break, a way is found to dissolve resistance amicably. And it all happens in a peaceful manner helping us to conserve precious mental and emotional energy, which we can channelize to other tasks. Thus we become more productive while remaining cheerful.

Vedanta is the source of infinite energy – from it flows positive strength, strength of strong convictions, of a strong mind and body. It teaches us to reject emotions caused by selfishness which in turn is caused by weakness, thus releasing within us an unbreakable dynamo, empowering us to achieve anything that we set out to do.

In the words of Swami Yatiswarananda, “Until you fall asleep, until you die, always busy yourself with Vedantic thoughts.” ❀

Fine character is always known by the nobility of its tastes.

Sister Nivedita

Ode to Sister
A Consecration at the Holy Feet of the Consecrated

*It was the dark days of pain and penury,
When dismay reached the greatest height,
When hunger and ignorance ruled the roost,
Came to this country a beacon light.*

*Hearing the call of a saint from the East,
To serve a country she knew then not
Shunned all niceties and ease of life
To serve all human as God.*

*She toiled hard night and day,
No time of her own to rest,
Teaching, preaching and serving
She did all to her best.*

*Margaret Noble-her parents named her,
And 'Khuki' -Her Eternal Mother,
Her Guru named her Nivedita,
But for all she was a Sister.*

*In work and toil a lioness she was,
But in spirit a child forever.
Life she gave for the country she loved,
But soul and heart to her mentor.*

LISA SEN

