

# Vedanta

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405 JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2019

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**The Quest for Human Unity as Viewed by  
Swami Vivekananda**  
*Swami Prabhananda*

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**Ramakrishna and Vivekananda - 2**  
*Sir John. Stewart-Wallace. C.B.*

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Illustrated Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna - 3



**SUCH MEN INDEED!**

It is not mentioned in their 'Science' that God can take human form; so how can they believe it? There are such men indeed!

Listen to a story. A man said to his friend, "I have just seen a house fall down with a terrific crash." Now, the friend to whom he told this had received an English education. He said: "Just a minute. Let me look it up in the newspaper." He read the paper but could not find the news of a house falling down with a crash. Thereupon he said to his friend: "Well, I don't believe you. It isn't in the paper; so it is all false."

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## Contents

2	<b>Editorial</b> <b>Swami Vivekananda's Moral Ideas and Ideals - 1</b>
6	<b>The Quest for Human Unity as Viewed by</b> <b>Swami Vivekananda</b> <i>Swami Prabhananda</i>
17	<b>Ramakrishna and Vivekananda - 2</b> <i>Sir John. Stewart-Wallace. C.B.</i>
29	<b>Meditation on the New Year – 1</b> <i>Swami Chetanananda</i>
37	<b>The Universal Message of Sri</b> <b>Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda</b> <i>Pravrajika Brahmaprana</i>
46	<b>Leaves from an Ashrama 66</b> <b>Discovery of a Stable Perch</b> <i>Swami Vidyatmananda</i>
48	<b>Programme</b>

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# Swami Vivekananda's Moral Ideas and Ideals - 1

## Introduction:

Morality has been one of the prime concerns of humanity since societies, manners and customs began to be evolved. In fact, the very word, 'morality' is derived from the Latin word 'mores' meaning habits or customs. Morality is more or less inherent in the very nature of man distinguishing him from animals. The importance of morality in human society has been beautifully expressed in the following verse: "Food, sleep, fear and carnality – these are the qualities common to both human beings and animals. These drives are not important to humans as compared to dharma (morality). Dharma is greater than any other things and is of extreme importance." (*Mahabharata, Shanti Parva 47.83*)

Like religion morality is a very potent force that has worked and is still working to mould the destinies of human race. True morality and religion are inseparable though distinct. Moral concerns, in their fullest sense, form a central aspect of religious life. One cannot be spiritual without being moral. In Indian thought morality in its true sense invariably reaches its culmination in transcendental experience, and in all moral ideas and ideals spiritual truth is always involved. Even in the West, religion and morality have been intertwined through the ages. We find that religious traditions have contributed greatly to human moral development.

The distinction between religion and morality is a relatively modern idea and though we find some evidence of it in Greek thought, it is probably traceable to the age of enlightenment when organised efforts were being made to divorce morality from religion. Moral life and codes were planned independently of the religious ideal. The reasons behind such efforts can be surmised as follows:

People, weary with centuries of religious strife, believed that religion has done more injury to the world than good and morality free from religious bias would serve the cause of human amity and progress in a much better way.

Religion was believed to make the people other-worldly and that under the religious impulse man developed a tendency to neglect humanity and human concerns.

Religious beliefs, doctrines, methods and customs varied considerably among different religions giving rise to hopeless contradictions, and for morality to have a universal appeal it was essential to free it from any religious bias whatsoever.

With the advancement of the scientific spirit in the West people were trying to judge everything by the touchstone of reason and sense experience. Indulging in religious pursuits and searching for God was considered to be nothing but superstition. Naturally, they felt that morality which could stand the test of reason and sense experience alone would be acceptable. In fact, "Karl Marx went to the extent of considering religion as the effort to support moral norms and codes of privileged strata and ruling groups while also mastering worldly wrongs with the false allure of worldly rewards." <sup>1</sup>

#### **Ethics – the Science of Conduct:**

In the West we find the study of moral behaviour develop into ethics which is also known as Moral Philosophy and which forms a part of Western Philosophy. Philosophy and religion are rather distinct in the West, whereas in India, *Darshana* or Philosophy and Religion are one. Indian Philosophy is not merely speculative in nature, as it is the case with Western Philosophy, and being more realistic aims at solving man's problems and needs. In India morality is a natural outgrowth of religion in man's individual existence and his relations with society. Ethics has been defined by William Lillie as "the normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies – a science which judges this conduct to be right or wrong, to be good or bad, or in some similar way."<sup>2</sup>

Thus ethics, as a normative science, is primarily concerned with the ideal or standard to which human conduct should conform. Its main business is to lay down the ideal and not to lay down rules for its attainment. But Ethics enquires into the nature of one's conduct which is nothing but expression of one's character. It defines character as the settled habit of will. It also enquires into the springs of action, motives, intentions and voluntary actions, only to pass judgements upon them. When any action conforms to the moral ideal it is said to be right and when it does not it is said to be wrong. Right actions are said to be duties. The end

which is subserved by the moral laws is said to be good. Since there can be a hierarchy of ends, there will be relative 'goods' and an absolute 'good.' Ethics is primarily concerned with the highest or absolute good, which is considered to be one of the ultimate values in Western Philosophy, the other two being Truth and Beauty.

### **Theories of the Moral Ideal in Western thought:<sup>3</sup>**

Ethics can broadly be classified into two types : Legal or Jural Ethics and Teleological Ethics.

Legal or Jural Ethics lays stress on the conception of right. 'Right' is derived from the Latin 'rectus' meaning straight or according to rule. When an action is said to be right, it means that it conforms to the moral law, either external or internal as the ultimate moral ideal. The External Law which determines the rightness or wrongness of action may be either the law of the society, or the law of the state, or the law of God. In any case, the external law is the command imposed upon people by a superior power and enforced by it through a system of punishment or reward. Internal law of conscience as propounded by Kant and others is an inherent urge in man to act morally. He called it 'categorical imperative.'

Teleological Ethics lays stress on the end or some good of the self. The term 'good' is connected with the German 'gut' meaning serviceable or valuable for an end. Conduct is good when it is serviceable for an end or ideal. The teleological theories may be of different types according as the conceptions of the self differ. However, one important point is to be noted here. In the west human personality is considered to be dichotomous i.e. consisting of body and mind – the mind itself being called the soul of the self.

Hedonism regards pleasure or gratification of the sensuous self as the ultimate moral standard. According to this school the rational faculty of man is a mere slave of passion or desires. The agnostic British philosopher Hume regarded reason as perfectly inert and could never produce or prevent any action or affection. Most modern psychologists, Freudeans especially, would agree with Hume. In ancient Greece, Democritus (circa 460 -370B.C.) Cyrenaics and later Epicureans were upholders of this view.

Rationalism or Rigorism emphasizes reason and thus regard the realization of the purely rational self by suppressing the sensuous self as the ultimate moral ideal. A life of passion is considered to be immoral and the life of reason moral. In ancient Greece, Heraclitus (circa 520 – 570 B.C.) was one of the earliest to hold this view. Later Cynics and Stoics continued this tradition.

Perfectionism or Eudaemonism regards the realization of the complete self by regulating the sensuous impulses and desires with the help of reason. It is an effort to combine both Hedonism and Rationalism. It aims at total and harmonious development of personality.

The Sophists (c. 450-400 B.C.) and Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who were chiefly responsible for laying the foundation of Western Ethics, were the first to develop 'Perfection' as the moral standard.

During the Renaissance this ideal was to some extent revived, and some Christian mystics strove for the ideal of spiritual perfection. Hegel (1770-1831) and evolutionists like Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1923) tried, in two different ways, to provide an ontological basis to perfection as an ethical ideal. According to them morality is not a static concept; it evolved gradually out of animal instincts and is still evolving towards some higher ideal of perfection. Karl Marx (1818-1883) too held the same view but believed that when human society attained the culmination of communism, man would have attained ethical perfection which he conceived as complete self-realisation through work.<sup>4</sup>

(To be continued)

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1. Green, Ronald M , *The encyclopedia of religion*, ( Macmillian publishing company, New York, 1987) p. 92
2. Lillie William, *An introduction to Ethics*, (Methuen and Co. Ltd, London, 3rd Ed., 1957) p. 2
3. For a detailed discussion on this subject see Dr. Jadunath Sinha, *A manual of Ethics*, (Calcutta; Central Book Agency, 1956) Ch.5
4. Prabuddha Bharata, Editorial, January 1985

# **The Quest for Human Unity as Viewed by Swami Vivekananda**

Swami Prabhananda

**U**NESCO is committed to maintain peace so that every nation can advance unobtrusively. To ensure this goal, Human Unity need to serve like a substratum of rock. Few questions crop up. Can human unity be truly achieved? Why we shall consider the ideal upheld by Swami Vivekananda?

The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission established by Swami Vivekananda is aspiring to achieve ultimately Human Unity, so also the World body United Nations, and its branch UNESCO. UNESCO education specialist Alisher Ulmanov while delivering the seventh annual convocation strongly recommended the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture International Course 'Understanding of Human Unity' to be a full-time UNESCO course. Interestingly, Dr Federico Mayor Director General of UNESCO made a speech on 8 October 1993. He said, 'I am indeed struck by the similarity of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission which Vivekananda established as early as 1897 with that of UNESCO drawn up in 1945. Both place the human being at the centre of their efforts aimed at development. Both place tolerance at the top of the agenda for building peace and democracy. Both recognize the variety of human cultures and societies as an essential aspect of common heritage. Both of them put their Institutions at the service of the peace, tolerance, human rights and peaceful co-existence, all the time remaining faithful to respective original goals. While UNESCO made some 30 declarations expressing a will to promote education, science,

culture, research and teaching, justice and the moral and intellectual solidarity, the Ramakrishna Mission is sincerely propagating the path stimulated by spirituality at individual and institutional level.

To achieve human unity, theoreticians advise us to cut the robes of the nationality, caste and culture to reveal the base bones of the humanity, but field workers think this to be a day dream. Among the great dividers of humanity, religion has been identified as the most challenging one. To address the challenge, the United Nations adopted two major declarations, one in 1981 and another in 1993. We may also recall the UN Millennium declaration adopted on 8 September 2000. In spite of these measures, the world recorded its dismay and condemnation at the serious instances including acts of violence, of intolerance and discrimination on the ground of religion or belief among other socio-economic issues occurring in many parts of the world.

None can deny the binding and consequently unifying capacity of religion. Besides, religion provides opportunities to man for manifesting his creative potentials. Religion is something unavoidable, particularly in a country like India, which has been nourished by religion, the essence of which is spirituality. Here religion is being and becoming. And it is the innermost core of education which helps a learner manifest divinity already in him.

Religion is committed to peace and harmony. However, looking into its track record Swami Vivekananda observed, 'The noblest words of peace that the world has ever heard have come from men on the religious plane and the bitterest denunciation that the world has ever known has been uttered by religious men.' (CW, II/p.375) Man gratefully remembers the finest contribution of religion in building the best elements of human culture; likewise, sadly remembers what happened on 11 September 2001 in New

York and on 26 November 2008 in Mumbai and the one that struck Hyderabad on 21 February 2013.

Some countries took desperate measure of banishing religion. As for example, the erstwhile Soviet Russia discarded religion, but it returned in much worse form. India, the land of religion, adopted secularism in 1976 and today India seems to have been torn from her moorings and drifting. India tried to by-pass religion on the plea of secularism and abolished spiritual education in schools. Consequently, gross materialism destroyed the peoples' finer sensibilities. The terrible fallout of neo-liberalism and the resultant marginalization of the poor people have created serious discontent. Worst of all the moral and ethical level have touched the bottom giving way to rampant corruption and India has been branded as one of the most corrupt countries. To have a better understanding of the dilemma, let us go deep into the issues involved. Can we truly dismiss religion?

Historians Will Durant and Ariel Durant have admitted in their scholarly book "The Lessons of History, (1968)," 'There is no significant example in history, before our time of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion' (p. 51). Simultaneously, we should remember George Washington who said in his Farewell Address, "Of all the dispositions and habits which led to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that natural morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles." (Quoted in *The Gift Unopened*, p.34) Along with them we may recall Swami Vivekananda saying, 'if we discover that there is one unity running through all these developments, spiritual, moral, and social, we shall find that religion, in the fullest sense of the word, must come into society, and into our every life.' (CW, II/p 115-16)

Next, let us consider a still deeper issue. International understanding should be effective first at individual level, community level and national level before we expect it to be operative at International level. Looking back, we see Arnold Toynbee in his 'Civilization on Trial' (1948) writing, 'Man is relatively good at dealing with non-human nature. What he is bad at is his dealing with human nature in himself and his fellow beings.' As human civilization was evolving this problem of understanding human nature had to be addressed carefully but it was never done with a long-term vision. Consequently, serious problems relating to misunderstanding of human nature often flared up.

Albert Einstein is reported to have warned, in 1946, after he realized the horror of Hiroshima: "Our world faces a crisis as yet unperceived by those possessing the power to make great decisions for good and evil. The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe."

Now, the Indian civilization has some unique characteristics which we do not find in European civilization, although both have civilization, for which each of them is proud. Under the facade of diversity, India has always enjoyed a deep belief of fundamental unity, thereby Indian civilization could easily accomplish nationhood and political unity whereas Europe has not made convincing progress, although the Brussels agreement, according to some, have demonstrated that European union is a cohesive entity, more than a mere geographical expression (Statesman, 12.02.13)

From a wider perspective we should take note of a cluster of crises. The present world is confronting major challenges like climate change, environmental degradation, unsustainable

consumption levels, widening inequalities etc. There is an imperative need for a radical change to restore environment, equity and long-term sustainability which include consideration for future generation as well. Actions taken so far by countries are inadequate and humanity is not yet moving fast enough to avoid the portending disaster.

Next, we need to answer why we have chosen Swami Vivekananda. We believe Swami Vivekananda is a colossal power who can guide humanity today. Famous Indologist A. L. Basham stated, '.... in centuries to come he (Swami Vivekananda) will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world.' We can quote from similar other authorities on this issue.

The world today is going through a challenging period of transition. We see many evils like racism and inter-ethnic and religious conflict returning among us with renewed force. Ignoring Vivekananda's warning against sectarianism, bigotry and fanaticism in the World Parliament of Religions, there has appeared the demon of terrorism. Now we have the problem of sustaining Indian tradition of unity in diversity in the face of India emerging in 21st century on principles of equality and democratic institutions. The real challenge is to maintain the diversity and the spirit of accommodation inherited from the past, at least to a reasonable extent, while repudiating hierarchy and creating more space for individual freedom. From a still wider perspective in today's world of globalization, we need to understand today's underpinning for human unity; today's youth with liberal education aspire to feel that he is the part of the whole of unity of mankind. He argues for perception of oneness, and there with a feeling of inter-connectivity and inter-dependence. To pursue this goal, society needs sustainable values and not situational values that is the current trend.

Though the search for human unity is powerfully ingrained in the human mind, we see, in practice human unity is a much cherished but an elusive goal. Jawaharlal Nehru echoed the voice of several great minds when he said, 'Some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside, a standardization of externals or even of beliefs. It was something deeper and, within its fold, the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practised, and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged.' (p. 61) To explain this process of unity, we often find mention of western concepts like "melting pot", "cultural mosaic" and "plural society"; these are perhaps not justifiable. Indian society in ancient, medieval and modern times always believed in an underlying unity and oneness of life that created a composite culture which projects the mainstream culture of India. India is only integrated politically and not otherwise. Also, India has a distinct national identity in spite of its composite culture. In spite of difference in language, religion, dress and manners, Indian culture is homogeneous, Thus the cultural unity of India is a unique phenomenon and unparalleled in the chequered annals of history. Unlike many other societies, Indian society in general has never been rigid; rather it has maintained a remarkable degree of flexibility, as a result, India has for all practical purpose absorbed waves of foreign culture which invaded India time and again. Also, many social reforms of subsequent periods have been assimilated in the composite culture.

In an article Swamiji wrote, "Knowledge is to find unity in the midst of diversity- to establish unity among things which appear to us to be different from one another. This particular relation by which man finds the sameness is called Law. This is what is known as Natural Law." (CW,V /p.519) It is therefore, rather natural to

find the search for Unity a characteristic-a special characteristic of Indian civilization. It is the spirit of oneness which subsists between the units by which the same spirit dwells in each unit. Also, it be noted that the unity is organic unity that brings change, development or progress that happens gradually rather than in a sudden or forced way. Indian cultural unity upholds this characteristic too. If the mainstream culture symbolically resembles a spread-out huge banyan tree, its branches may be termed as Oriya culture, Maharashtrian culture, Bengali culture etc. In this context, let us keep in view the word 'harmony' which hints primarily at non-contradiction and also the word 'synthesis' which means the combining of the separate things, ideas etc. into a complete whole. So, unity may be conceived as a synthesis of diversities.

In the context of Western science, Swami Vivekananda clearly stated, 'In modern language, the theme of the Upanishads is to find an ultimate unity of things. Knowledge is nothing but finding unity in the midst of diversity. Every science is based upon this: all human knowledge is based upon the finding of unity in the midst of diversity; and if it is the task of small fragments of human knowledge, which we call our sciences, to find unity in the midst of a few different phenomena, the task becomes stupendous when the theme before us is to find unity in the midst of the marvellously diversified universe, where prevail unnumbered differences .in name and form, in matter and spirit - each thought differing from every other thought, each form differing from every other form. Yet, to harmonise these many planes and unending Lokas, in the midst of infinite variety to find unity, is the theme of the Upanishads.' (CW, III/p.397-98)

In his public address entitled, 'The Mission of the Vedanta' Swamiji said, 'Wherever there is evil and wherever there is

ignorance and want of knowledge, I have found out by experience that all evil comes .... relying upon differences, and that all good comes from faith in equality, in the underlying sameness and oneness of things.' The regeneration of the Indian people, with the masses placed in the position of primacy, which they had always been denied, was to be tried but the entire exercise was to be charged by spirituality. In his perception, human life and in fact the entire universe was an indivisible totality. This goal was drawn from the Vedantic tradition as taught by his guru Sri Ramakrishna. Swamiji emphatically pleaded, 'I only ask you to work to realize more and more the Vedantic ideal of the solidarity of man and his inborn divine nature.' (CW, III/p.196)

To meet the complex needs of today's world, Swami Vivekananda preached a universalist spiritual faith. He recommended a universal religion, 'which will have a place for, every human being, from the lowest grovelling savage not far removed from the brute, to the highest man towering by the virtues of his head and heart almost above humanity; making society stand in awe of him and doubt his human nature. It will be a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its policy, which will recognize divinity in every man and woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be created in aiding humanity to realize its own true, divine nature.' (CW, I/p.19) Such a religion will spontaneously generate feelings of love and sympathy in the hearts of men.

In search of universal unity, we are proud to record our forefathers' discovery that the idea of separateness was erroneous, there is oneness of life. Vedanta pointedly says, separation between man and man, between man and woman does not exist, separation is not real. It is merely apparent. Swamiji says. 'In the heart of things there is unity still. If you go below the surface,

you find that unity between man and man, between races and races, high and low, rich and poor, gods and men, and men and animals. If you go deep enough, all will be seen as only variations of the One, and he who has attained to this conception of Oneness has no more delusion. . . . . He has traced the reality of everything to the Lord, the centre, the unity of everything, and that is eternal existence, eternal knowledge, eternal bliss.' (CW, III/p.153)

Equally important to note that oneness of existence is the basis of all morality and ethics. Every holy text preaches "love your fellow-men" but does not mention why should I care for my fellow-men. The Vedanta provides the answer. In the words of Swami Vivekananda; ' . . . . the whole world is one - the oneness of the universe - the solidarity of all life - that in hurting anyone I am hurting myself, in loving anyone I am loving myself. Hence, we understand why it is that we ought not to hurt others. The reason for ethics, therefore, can only be had from this ideal of the Impersonal God.' (CW, III/p.129-30)

We need to realize that there is a common ground behind the material, mental and spiritual worlds which are but variegated expressions of the same reality, the common ground. Unity and oneness of life is not only a grand ideal but a fact of life. The more this idea of the solidarity of man and man's innate divine nature is understood and practised, the more we can attain peace and harmony at all levels of life. But do how many really ask for it?

To face the serious challenges of today's world, it is necessary to have some big shift in goals, institutions and values. Also, it requires a change in attitudes and actions at the individual, community and country levels so as to have a realistic understanding of the problem and its dimensions, as well as sincere assimilation of Swami Vivekananda's ideas and ideals. I sincerely believe, ideas of Swami Vivekananda can squarely

provide guideline for developing a world-vision in keeping with his dream. His ideas can bridge the gulf between action and contemplation, work and worship, the sacred and secular.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of persons are groping while they themselves are drifting in the morass of gross materialistic life; most of them do not have any ideal at all. It is wise to have an ideal and therewith sincere pursuit for achieving the same. Swamiji exhorts, 'Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes.' (*CW, III/p.193*) Simultaneously, all of us should try to have a broader international view and understanding. Swami Vivekananda reminds us: 'There is but one basis of well-being, social, political or spiritual - to know that I and my brother are one. This is true for all countries and all people.' (*CW, VIII/p.350*) To reap the benefit of spirituality, religious harmony and understanding in society as a whole need to be promoted consciously. These ideas and the world vision have to be implemented at the individual and collective level. No doubt this entails a new paradigm of social and spiritual goals and also reviewing the objectives of the existing policies and institutions.

Material wealth, swelling consumption of pleasurable things and organic satisfaction are generally sought after by man and woman. After a chain of enjoyment there is a satiation, prompting to a quest for fresh, newer pleasure and satisfaction. Vedanta does not condemn man's pursuit of worldly pleasure to powers. It draws attention to the fact 'There is something better and higher than these.' To those interested in this pursuit, it leads man gradually to the highest manifestation of his potential divinity and peaceful co-existence.

Swamiji made a bold promise before he passed away, 'I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere, until the world shall know that it is one with God.' (*CW, V/p.414*) And to prepare

the ground for this, he in his short life of less than a decade, preached broad-based 'Vedanta', a universalist spiritual faith and advised young men to create a mass consciousness through service of man as worship of God and education of the masses for self-reliance. It seemed the seed fell on very infertile soil. I quote from Sister Nivedita's letter to Miss Josephine Macleod, dated 11 April 1906. She writes, 'You, when we who understood Swamiji, and remember Him are dead, there will come a long period of obscurity and silence, for the work that He did. It will seem to be forgotten, until, suddenly, in 150 or 200 years, it will be found to have transformed the West.' The present upsurge in connection with his 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary celebration authenticates Sister Nivedita's prophecy and hints at present prospects.

*(Reprinted from the book "International Understanding for Human Unity : Past Lessons and Present Prospects", RMIC publication, page nos 20 to 30)*

I am practical, very practical, in my own way... You are practical in one way, and I in another. There are different types of men and minds....I do not say your view is wrong, you are welcome to it. Great good and blessing come out of it, but do not, therefore, condemn my view. Mine also is practical in its own way. Let us all work on our own plans. Would to God all of us were equally practical on both sides. I have seen some scientists who were equally practical, both as scientists and as spiritual men, and it is my great hope that in course of time the whole of humanity will be efficient in the same manner. When a kettle of water is coming to the boil, if you watch the phenomenon, you find first one bubble rising, and then another and so on, until at last they all join, and a tremendous commotion takes place. This world is very similar. Each individual is like a bubble, and the nations, resemble many bubbles. Gradually these nations are joining, and I am sure the day will come when separation will vanish and that Oneness to which we are all going will become manifest. A time must come when every man will be as intensely practical in the scientific world as in the spiritual, and then that Oneness, the harmony of Oneness, will pervade the whole world.

Swami Vivekananda

## Ramakrishna and Vivekananda - 2

*[The first part of this article, dealing with Sri Ramakrishna, appeared in the previous number.]*

By Sir John. Stewart-Wallace. C.B.

**A**mong the young enquirers who flocked to see and hear Ramakrishna after his great illumination, there came, as we have seen, Vivekananda. This was the monastic name later taken by Narendranath Dutta, who in 1863 had been born into an aristocratic Calcutta family of wealth, learning, and warrior caste. Physically, mentally and emotionally, he was the very opposite of Ramakrishna. Strong in physique, he had immense energy, a commanding personality and an academic training in the Western tradition. He had, moreover, the Western analytical, rationalistic, truth-seeking and vigorous mind with a deep distrust of all dogma and sentimental effusion. He was, indeed, a born iconoclast and free-thinker with a wit of which to beware. Once, when asked at a public lecture in America by a Scot, who appeared to have dined too well, what was the difference between a babu and a baboon, he flashed back, " Not very much; something like the difference between a Scot and a sot". He was thus specially endowed to interpret Ramakrishna in the most appealing way to the West. He waged war on the passivity and submissiveness of the East. " Above all, be strong," he would say. " be manly. I have respect even for one who is wicked so long as he is manly and strong". He detested anything that savoured of the effeminate. A man of action, he was far removed from Schweitzer's life-denying conception of Eastern thought and religion.

Not without much scepticism did he at first listen to Ramakrishna and witness his ecstasies. At that stage of his life he regarded ecstatic visions as most Westerners would, as pure

hallucination. Nor did he hide his scepticism from Ramakrishna himself. Confident that he must receive a negative reply and so make Ramakrishna look foolish, he once demanded, as Ramakrishna poured forth ecstatic descriptions of God: "Sir, have you seen God?" To his immense surprise, Ramakrishna answered: "I see Him just as I see you here, only in a sense much more intensely ". Vivekananda recognized to the full that Ramakrishna always spoke from absolute conviction but, as most Europeans would, he harboured doubts as to Ramakrishna's absolute sanity and, agnostic as he was, he continued to doubt the objective truth of what lay behind these personal experiences.

Nor did he lose these doubts and misgivings easily. Yet gradually he came to perceive that behind the ecstasy and apparent hallucination of Ramakrishna was an intellect far profounder than his own. His conversion, however, was not on the purely intellectual plane. Slowly, he came to realize that by his intellect alone man could not attain to God. In this realization he was helped by Ramakrishna who appears to have exercised over him those psychic powers, associated with the great masters, which enable them to give others insight into things eternal otherwise hidden from them. The accounts we have of the change in Vivekananda tell us that Ramakrishna, by touching Vivekananda's body, could produce spiritual reactions and ecstasies in him, carrying him to insights far beyond the limits of dialectical reason.

Private misfortune now came to teach Vivekananda the fleeting nature of things temporal. On the death in 1884 of his father, who had lived much beyond the family income, he and his family were reduced to destitution so acute that he actually suffered from physical hunger. In his bitterness he revolted against God crying out, " If God is good and gracious, why then do millions of people

die for want of food? " Already prepared as he was by a study of Mill's Three Essays on Religion, he argued as though he were a convinced atheist. Ramakrishna, however, never lost faith in him. After ecstatic experiences reminiscent of those of Ramakrishna himself, Vivekananda had the converting vision which caused him to renounce the world and, as a monk, dedicate himself to the service of God.

On Ramakrishna's death in 1886, Vivekananda put himself at the head of the little community of monks into which about a dozen of Ramakrishna's vowed disciples formed themselves. Christians will note with special interest that what was to become the world-wide Ramakrishna Mission of today came into being on Christmas Eve, 1886, when Vivekananda, who had a passionate love for the Christ, related the story of His life to the meditating monks and called on them to renounce all, as Jesus had done, and in work for the redemption of the world to realize God. From their very foundation, therefore, they were free from all narrowness in their religious approach.

In spite of all, the miracle remains that Ramakrishna, his message and this little community did not pass away in their seeming insignificance. And this the more especially as these ardent young monks in their zeal for God desired only to escape from the world in the realization of God in samadhi. They felt no mission to reform the world. Vivekananda, however, though himself filled with the same desire and sharing their longing for a wandering religious life, would not permit them any such indulgence. He forced them to the disciplined study of the problems of religion and of philosophy just as if they had been Westerners, always driving home on the spiritual plane the great message of Ramakrishna, that there is a Truth Universal

surpassing all the limits of schools and creeds, embracing them all in a holy Oneness.

So deep, however, is the call of the forest in the Indian soul and so profound a seeking for freedom from all the worldly ties of house, home, family or friends, that a compromise had to be made. It was arranged that a portion of the monks should always remain in the monastery carrying on its discipline and its duties, while the others were free to depart and wander for a time alone, meditating on God in the centuries-old Indian way. After two years, Vivekananda himself found the great call irresistible and from time to time, as a beggar, he wandered on foot through India from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. He thus came into contact with the hideous poverty of the Indian masses and realized the wisdom of the Western gospel of humanity and the deep need for all its good works in the practical relief of human suffering. He saw also the vanity of wealth and pomp, and caught a glimpse of that need for a great synthesis between Eastern faith and Western science of which he was to become so great a prophet.

At this time, about 1892 he indeed became obsessed with the physical condition of the Indian masses to such an extent that, in his agonized pity for them he called out, "Let the study of the Vedanta and the practice of meditation be left over to the future life. Let this body be consecrated to the service of others ". He began to seek for some way to bring the masses physical relief. Then came to him the thought of the vast material wealth of America, and vague ideas grew in him of making a vital appeal to the world on behalf of India. But how? Just at that time, by another seeming miracle, he heard that a great Parliament of Religions was shortly to be held at Chicago. He made up his mind forthwith that that was where his appeal should be made, and he determined to go. In his own words. " I have now travelled all over India ... to

see with my own eyes the terrible poverty and misery of the masses. It is now my firm conviction that it is futile to preach religion among them without first trying to remove their poverty and their suffering. It is for this reason, to find more means for the salvation of the poor of India, that I am now going to America ". By a further series of seeming miracles, from his being clothed in gorgeous apparel and loaded with money by the Maharajah of Khetri in Madras, to his being picked up exhausted on the roadside in Chicago by a rich society woman, and being introduced by her to the Chairman of the Parliament of Religions, he finally found himself when thirty years of age, in 1893, at that Parliament so largely made famous by himself.

For the message Vivekananda had to give, the world was singularly ready. The era of separated nations, and of religions unknown to and unstudied by one another, was passing with the passing of the nineteenth century. Geographical distance was being annihilated. International understanding was being fostered by great international expositions of the arts and crafts. One of the greatest of these was the Chicago Fair of 1893. To the arts and crafts of all nations there to be exhibited, some religious genius had the inspiration to add a "World Parliament of Religions", where representatives of the world's religions might meet one another, and in meeting promote human brotherhood and peace. It is safe to say that the mainly Christian promoters of the Parliament, and the great Church dignitaries, including a Cardinal of the Church of Rome who attended, did not foresee the bombshell to be burst on orthodoxy and exclusiveness by an unknown young Hindu monk, Vivekananda. His first speech took the Parliament by storm. He did not speak as in apology for a heathen idolatry (as at that time most Christians believed non-Christianity to be) but, in highest charity for all, he spoke on behalf of the God of all mankind

and of a religion four millennia old. Differing from all the other representatives, who spoke for their particular creeds and believed implicitly in their superiority, he transcended every particular faith in his call to the worship of the One to whom all these faiths were but paths. His gospel was universalism.

His commanding personality and his opening words, "Sisters and brothers of America", electrified the audience of seven thousand people. He had an ovation, the whole audience rising to its feet in prophetic consciousness that they were going to hear of something new and divine touching the longing for God in their hearts. He became at once the world figure of the Parliament, and the American press hailed him as such. " He is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions;" said the New York Herald, and added the profound comment, " after hearing him, we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to his learned nation So moving was his speech that it is worthy of verbatim quotation:

"Sisters and brothers of America, it fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial greeting which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient Order of monks in the world. I thank you in the name of the mother of religions, and I thank you in the name of the millions and millions of Indian people of all classes and sects.

"My thanks also to some speakers on the platform who have told you that these men from far-off nations may well claim the honour of bearing to the different lands the idea of toleration. I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I belong to a religion into whose sacred language, the Sanskrit, the word exclusion is untranslatable. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and refugees of all religions and all

nations of the earth. We have gathered to our bosom the purest remnants of the Israelites, a remnant which came to Southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I belong to the nation which has sheltered and is still sheltering remnants of the great Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest childhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings: 'As the different streams have their sources in different places and mingle their waters in the sea, O Lord, so the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee "'

"The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world, of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: 'Whoever comes to Me through whatever form, reaches Me. All men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me. Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for this horrible demon, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But its time has come and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism of all persecutions with the sword or the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same God.'"

He put his faith on the highest possible pinnacle by proclaiming that the Hindu religion had been revealed by the Vedas, but that by the Vedas were meant not only the books of that name but the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws inspired from on high in

the soul, not only in Hindus but in all the saints and seers of every land and age. Consciousness, he pointed out, is only the surface of the mental ocean. The great Indian Rishis or prophets, he declared, had mastered the art of concentration by which the utmost depths of consciousness could be plumbed, so that they could recall past lives. Hence the Indian believes that he is a soul, something quite apart from the particular body of any one incarnation. And this soul is in its essence, pure and holy. The tragedy was, he insisted, that this soul has somehow got itself so tied down in matter that it thinks of itself as matter. We are in reality children of God, holy and perfect beings, who have lost the way and are in mental agony, seeking in darkness and despair to find the path back to God. The great masters have been sent to show us the way.

In a final speech to the Parliament, having referred to Asoka's great effort in 253 B.C., and to that of Akbar in 1600 A.D., to give the high universalist faith to mankind, he declared it was reserved for America to proclaim to all quarters of the globe its essential gospel that the Lord is in every religion.

Vivekananda was now a world figure eagerly sought after in America and Europe by the rich and learned as well as by the publicity agents. His own reaction to all that had happened at the Parliament of Religions was typically Eastern and showed forth the profundity of the religion in his own soul. He wept. He knew that his life as a solitary monk in silent communion with God was at an end. His profound humility, tolerance and understanding were not disturbed. " In my life he said. " I have seen a great many spiritual men . . . who did not believe in God at all—that is to say, in our sense of the word. Perhaps they understood God better than we can ever do ". Here is tolerance in *excelsis*—the meekness that will inherit the earth.

The consequence of his fame was an immediate lecturing tour throughout America, and during it a new side of life was revealed to him in the bitter opposition he encountered from every shade of sectarian orthodoxy and more especially, as we can in all charity comprehend, from the large body of fanatical Christians and missionaries. He also went to Europe and to England, where he met the foremost scholars of his day. Englishmen may be pardoned if they note that he came as an enemy and left as a friend. "No one ever landed on English soil he said, " with more hatred in his heart than I did for the English" ; but he added, " there is none among you that loves the English people more than I do now". He discovered, he said, a nation of heroes: " Their education is to hide their feelings and never to show them, but there is a deep spring of feeling in the English heart. If you once know how to reach it, he is your friend forever ". With great depth of political sense, he perceived " they have solved the secret of obedience without slavish cringing—great freedom with great law-abidingness ", and with great political detachment he had the courage, after his return to India, to say that not the English but the Indians themselves were at root responsible for Indian degradation. "Our aristocratic ancestors went on treading the common masses of our people under foot" he said, "till they became helpless, till under this torment the poor people nearly forgot that they were human beings ".

For centuries he insisted the people had been taught theories of degradation, that they were nothing: so frightened had they been that they had really become animals. Let them hear of God, he cried, and that even the lowest of the low have God within them. "Aye; let every man and woman and child without respect of caste or birth, weakness or strength, hear and learn that behind the strong and the weak, behind the high and the low, behind

everyone there is that Infinite Soul assuring the infinite possibility and infinite capacity of all to become great and good. Let us proclaim to every soul . . . Arise, awake, and sleep not, till the goal is reached. .. none is really weak! The soul is infinite, omnipotent and omniscient. Stand up, assert yourselves, proclaim the God within you, do not deny Him."

After four years' absence, he returned to India in 1897 where he was received as a great national hero. Rajahs, pandits and the masses combined, giving him a triumphal progress from Ceylon to Calcutta. Special committees were formed to receive him in all the towns through which he passed; streets and houses were decorated; everywhere the masses roared their ecstatic welcome. But the calmness of his own soul was neither disturbed nor endangered. He saw in it all a national tribute to the great universal religion for which he stood, and proclaimed himself to be but a poor monk without worldly goods, name, or home, yet carrying within him the greatest riches of all—God. He now devoted his life, broken in health as he was by the magnitude of the work he had done, to the spread of the great gospel of the spiritual oneness of the universe or, as he phrased it, to the teaching that, "You and I are not only brothers - you and I are really one. Europe wanted that gospel, he declared, as much as the downtrodden races of India, and with prophetic vision he saw that the great Vedantic principle of brotherhood would unconsciously form the basis of all social and political reforms he perceived to be coming in Europe and in America. And, he might have added, the basis also of the religious reforms yet to come, for in Vedanta there is that harmony between religion and science which our modern world so insistently demands. As a first step towards this great reform, he at once founded the Ramakrishna Mission to provide the organization necessary for the establishment of

fellowship among the different religions of the world which, for him, were only so many forms of the undying eternal religion. Intensely practical as he was, he continued to take steps to prevent the Mission being merely a retreat from the world. His aim was to reform the world and for this purpose men were to be highly trained as teachers of science, philosophy and the humanities. For Vivekananda, modern science at its best was a manifestation of a deep religious sense. It was a seeking to find the ultimate Truth by profound and sincere investigation. Monasteries of professed monks were, therefore, to be formed throughout India, as well as retreats for laymen. Monks of the Order were to be sent abroad to form new spiritual centres throughout the world. There must be a synthesis between the East and the West in which the West would give the East its social services its material civilization and its science, while India would give the West that life of the Spirit which she has throughout the ages so devotedly developed. While engaged in this great work. Vivekananda died in 1902 at the age of thirty-nine.

His death, however, did not end the work he had begun. The Ramakrishna Mission has for over half a century gone gallantly on in its great mission of spreading the gospel of universalism towards which the world in sore travail is pressing. The Mission strengthens and sustains all those throughout the world who begin to realize that their own path is not the only path to God; that in His mercy God allows Himself to be approached by a thousand different paths attuned to the spiritual capacity of those seeking Him with humble and contrite heart.

May we not rejoice that the holy revelation experienced by Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and their great predecessors was not peculiar to India, but that its very essence—union with the Divine— has ever been vouchsafed to the elect of God?

In that experience, the great Indian masters are linked with Plotinus and all the great Christian mystics. In the fine words of Romain Rolland: " The Divine Infinity, the Absolute God, the divine Revelation diffused throughout the universe, yet inscribed in the centre of each soul; the great path of losing all sense of ego and self in union with the Ultimate; the 'deification' of the enlightened soul after its identification with Unity – these were all explained by Plotinus of Alexandria and by the early masters of Christian mysticism with an ordered power and beauty which need fear no comparison with the monumental structure of India." That Revelation divine has been all-embracing, as are the Everlasting Arms. Its human expression has indeed differed and, in the expression, has produced separations, deep and sometimes bitter to the death, between the great religions of the world. So terribly does man still come short of that high charity without which we are as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal, that we are still toiling in the isolation of our different paths up the Holy Hill. But in Tolstoy's exquisite phrase. " We shall all meet when we have arrived."

It is thought which is the propelling force in us. Fill the mind with the highest thoughts, hear them day after day, think them month after month. Never mind failures; they are quite natural, they are the beauty of life, these failures. What would life be without them? It would not be worth having if it were not for struggles. Where would be the poetry of life? Never mind the struggles, the mistakes. I never heard a cow tell a lie, but it is only a cow – never a man. So never mind these failures, these little backslidings; hold the ideal a thousand times, and if you fail a thousand times, make the attempt once more. The ideal of man is to see God in everything. But if you cannot see Him in everything, see Him in one thing, in that thing which you like best, and then see Him in another. So on you can go. There is infinite life before the soul. Take your time and you will achieve your end... Swami Vivekananda

## **Meditation on the New Year – 01**

Swami Chetanananda

**T**here is a custom in every country of the world to welcome the New Year. On the first day of the New Year we try to feel a new impetus or motivation towards life. A desire for newness is hidden in every human heart, so human beings always aspire to see something new, to hear something new, to do or say something new. We look at the activities of the previous year and begin to reckon the profit and loss. What did we achieve last year? What did we lose? What did we learn? To retrieve whatever we lost, or could not achieve or learn, we make New Year's resolutions. We start our New Year with new enthusiasm and zeal. We pray to God to give us patience and perseverance to carry out our resolution.

Welcoming the New Year is a cultural tradition. On New Year's Day, ancient Babylonians would take a vow to repay their debt to God. The ancient Romans would make various solemn resolves to their God Janus—which is why the name of the first month is January in the Julian Calendar. On New Year's Day, many Christians pray to God to preserve their resolutions. Among the Jews, it is customary to beg forgiveness for any wrongdoings committed during the previous year. On New Year's Day, Hindu merchants go to temples with new account books and offer worship for the success of their businesses.

Although there is no connection with the New Year to religion in most cultures, it is a day of festivity. In India, on the first day of the year people go to parks, seaside resorts, or gardens to picnic. Some go to the zoo with their children. Some visit their friends and families, and some go to Belur Math, Dakshineswar, and other temples to worship. On New Year's Day thousands of people go to the Cossipore garden house, where Sri Ramakrishna became the

kalpataru (the wish-fulfilling tree) on 1 January 1886 and blessed the devotees.

In the United States, New Year's Day is generally observed with parties, parades, and picnics. Some people go to church to pray, and some make New Year's resolutions like these for self-improvement:

1. Improve physical well-being: eat healthy food, lose weight, exercise more, eat better, quit drinking alcohol and smoking, get rid of bad habits.

2. Improve mental well-being: think positively, laugh more often, enjoy life.

3. Improve finances: get out of debt, save money.

4. Improve career: perform better at one's current job, or get a better job.

5. Improve education: get a better education, learn something new, read more books.

6. Improve self: become more organized, reduce stress, be less grumpy, watch less television, get along with people.

Our Vedanta centres in the United States observe New Year's Day in various ways: Some centres start with midnight meditation and prayer. Some centres observe a vigil from six o'clock in the morning to six o'clock in the evening; during this time, monks and devotees take turns each hour in silently repeating their Ishtamantra. Some centres conduct retreats where they discuss the episode of Ramakrishna as the Kalpataru.

Although more than 130 years have passed, people from all over the world have not forgotten that memorable day: 1 January 1886. One proof of this is the Kalpataru Festival that is held at Cossipore every year. On that day nearly a million people stand in line from morning to night to bow down to Ramakrishna's picture in his

room, and they pray to him to fulfil their wishes. That day is now the object of our meditation.

Meditation has infinite power. It is not limited by time. One can turn a past event into a present event in the mind through meditation. We can imagine that it is New Year's Day and visualize Ramakrishna lying on his bed in the southwest corner of his room at the Cossipore garden house. There was no cot in his room: his bed was a mattress placed on a carpet and a mat. It was convenient for him to sleep that way, because his body was weak from cancer. The Master is chanting the Divine Mother's name and praying for the welfare of the devotees.

During the Master's stay in Dakshineswar, he used to pace his room in the late hours of the night and pray to God. He could see then the spiritual progress of his devotees and remove their obstacles if there were any. Truly, he loved the devotees, because he had experience that the Bhakta (devotee), Bhagavata (scripture), and Bhagavan (God) are one. If there were no devotees, then with whom would God play? If there are no companions, God cannot enact his divine play.

In Cossipore, the Master continued to observe his daily routine. Sashi Maharaj would help the Master with his morning ablutions. The Master would brush his teeth with a twig and scrape his tongue. He always kept his mouth clean because he used it for chanting God's name and talking about Him to the devotees. He then drank a little fruit juice or milk. He could not eat solid food because of the cancer in his throat. Holy Mother would prepare farina or tapioca pudding for his lunch. After lunch, he would take some rest. After his noon rest on 1 January 1886, he felt better than usual. At 3 p.m. he told his nephew: "Ramlal, I feel good today. Let us go for a walk in the garden." Ramlal replied: "Yes, uncle. You look good. Let us go for a walk."

The Master put on a red-bordered dhoti, a shirt, a coat, a broad red-bordered chadar, a cap that covered his ears, and sandals. He took his walking stick. Latu Maharaj and Ramlal helped him go down the wooden steps to the ground floor. He then came out of the house through the western door and began to walk on the garden path. Because it was a holiday, more than 30 people had come from Calcutta to see the Master. Some were waiting inside the house and some were under the trees in the garden. They were talking amongst themselves about the Master. When they saw him, they all stood up reverently and bowed down. They were delighted to see him in the garden, and they followed him as he walked.

When Latu Maharaj saw that the Master was walking with the devotees, he returned to the Master's room. He and Sharat Maharaj then took the opportunity to clean his bed and room thoroughly. They quickly removed the Master's cotton mattress, quilt, and pillow and placed them in the sun on the southern roof to air them out. In the winter season, having a warm mattress and pillow are very comfortable. The disciples' love, feeling, and thoughtful service for their guru overwhelm us. People always try to make the person whom they love happy and comfortable.

It was a pleasant and sunny afternoon. The red brick-dust garden path went from the main house to the south and then turned right towards the gate. The Master proceeded slowly southward to the gate. The devotees followed him at a little distance. When he reached the midpoint of the path between the house and the gate, the Master saw Girish, Ram, Atul, and a few others under a tree on the west side of the path. They bowed down and came over to him joyfully.

Before anyone had spoken a word, the Master addressed Girish, asking him: "Girish, what have you seen and understood [about me] that makes you say all these things [that I am an avatar and so

on] to everyone, wherever you go?" Girish responded by kneeling down at the Master's feet, folding his hands before his raised face, and saying in a voice choked with emotion: "What more can I say of Him? Even the sages Vyasa and Valmiki could find no words to measure His glory!"

Ramakrishna was deeply moved by Girish's words and his conviction. He stood still on the red brick-dust garden path, his whole body covered in goosebumps as his mind ascended into ecstasy. His whole face beamed with divine bliss. Seeing that wonderful form of the Master, the devotees' joy knew no bounds. Exultant, they began to shout, "Jai Sri Ramakrishna, Jai Sri Ramakrishna—Victory to Sri Ramakrishna!" Some collected flowers from the garden and offered them to him, and some took the dust of his feet. This scene reminds us of a couplet from devotional Vaishnava literature: "O Radhanath, Krishna, please give us the dust of your feet. Let us smear some dust on our bodies, and some we shall keep with us. O Krishna, give us the dust of your feet. May we have unflinching devotion at your blessed feet birth after birth. O Radhanath, the beloved of Radha, please give us the dust of your feet."

We regret that there was nobody there with a camera to take a picture of the Master in samadhi on the garden path. How wonderful it would be to have such a photograph! However, if we did have such a picture, we would be deprived of the bliss that our limitless imagination can bring.

After some time, the Master came down from deep samadhi (antardashā) to a half-ecstatic state (ardhya-bāhya-dashā). Smiling, he said three sentences: "What more need I tell you? I bless you all. May you all be illumined!" After uttering those words, he became overwhelmed with love and compassion for his devotees, and went into ecstasy. Please remember that this auspicious occasion was

the last time that he appeared outside the house to a group of devotees, blessing them collectively. On this day he expressed his last message to all. (Of course, later he blessed and advised some devotees individually)

Swami Saradananda wrote:

That selfless and profound blessing touched the devotees deep within their hearts and they became mad with joy. They forgot time and space; they forgot the Master's illness; they forgot that they had vowed not to touch the Master until his recovery. They saw that a wonderous divine being had come down to them from heaven and was calling to them affectionately; they also felt that their suffering grieved him and that he was carrying in his heart an infinite pain and compassion for them and offering them shelter as selflessly as a loving mother. They became anxious to bow down to him and take the dust of his feet. Their cries of "Victory to Ramakrishna" resounded in all directions as one by one they bowed down to him. As they touched his feet, the ocean of the Master's compassion burst through all bounds and created an astonishing phenomenon. Almost every day in Dakshineswar we had seen the Master become overwhelmed with compassion and grace and bless some devotees with his powerful divine touch. On this day, remaining in a semi-ecstatic state, he began to touch each devotee present in a similar way, and their joy was boundless.

The devotees understood that from this day on, the Master would no longer conceal his divinity from them or from anyone else in the world. They had no doubt that from now on all sinners and sufferers—despite their shortcomings, lack of spirituality, or feelings of inadequacy—would find shelter at his blessed feet. Seeing the Master in that unique and exalted state, some became speechless and could only watch him as if bewitched. Some called out loudly to everyone inside the house to come and be blessed by

the Master's grace. Others picked flowers from the garden and began to worship him, uttering mantras and showering him with flowers.

On Easter some devout Christians meditate on the last seven utterances of Christ: 1. Father, forgive them, for they know not what they're doing. 2. (To the thief): I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise. 3. (To his mother): Dear woman, here is your son. 4. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? 5. I am thirsty. 6. It is finished! 7. Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands.

Now we shall meditate on the last three public sentences of Ramakrishna:

1. **"Tomāder ār ki balba**—What more need I tell you?" From 1879 to 1885 the devotees and disciples visited the Master and listened to his message. The blessed M. recorded 177 days of the Master's conversations in the Kathamrita (Gospel). Still there is no limit to how many incidents and talks of the Master we have lost.

According to an ancient Greek legend, swans sing a beautiful song just before dying. This is the origin of the phrase "swan song." Like that legendary Rajahansa (swan), Paramahansa Ramakrishna was in essence saying to his devotees: "Look, I have been giving my message to you continually for the last seven or eight years. Now my throat has developed cancer due to speaking for long periods day after day, and also due to taking upon myself the sins of others. I have no more strength to speak. I am now at the end of my life, and I am telling you the most important thing. Listen carefully."

The Master used to teach according to the needs of each individual. Once a man came and said, "Sir, give me knowledge in one sentence." The Master replied: "Brahman alone is real and the world is unreal." On another occasion he told someone: "If you

want to know in a thousand words, go to Keshab Sen. And if you want to know in one sentence, come here.”

2. **“Asirbād kori—**I bless you all.” In Bengali, the word “I” does not appear. It is implied by the verb “kori.” The Master meant to say, “I bless you all,” but he could not utter the word “I” and “mine.” His ego was completely uprooted, and his “I” was merged with God’s “I”.

On 28 November 1883, the Master went to see Keshab Sen, who was then very ill. Keshab’s mother requested the Master to bless her son so that he would recover. The Master gravely said: “What can I do? God alone blesses all. Please pray to the Divine Mother, who is the bestower of all bliss. She will take away your troubles.” When he was asked to bless Keshab’s eldest son, the Master said, “It is not given to me to bless anyone.” With a sweet smile he stroked the boy’s body gently.

Ramakrishna’s mysterious “I” played out in different planes at different times. Swami Saradananda wrote:

It is evident that after he attained nirvikalpa samadhi, the Master’s little, or unripe, “I” completely disappeared. And whatever I-ness was left saw itself as ever connected with the Cosmic, or ripe, “I”. Sometimes it would feel itself to be a limb or a part of the Cosmic “I”, and sometimes it would ascend gradually to the level of the Cosmic “I” and merge in It. The Master could therefore grasp all ideas within all minds because all ideas of all minds in the world spring from that Cosmic “I”. Because the Master was always identified with that all-pervading “I”, he was able to know and understand any ideas that arose in the Cosmic Mind.

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# The Universal Message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda

*by Pravrajika Brahma-prana*

What is the universal message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda? Swami Brahmananda, direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and first president of the Ramakrishna Order, framed the answer by pointing in the direction where the answer to this question lies. He stated: “Sri Ramakrishna was revealed to the world at large through Swamiji [Swami Vivekananda]. Know that their words and teachings are not different.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, when we examine Sri Ramakrishna’s universal message, we can see how Swami Vivekananda not only embodied it, but how his mission in the West was a profound commentary on it.

First, Sri Ramakrishna taught the harmony of religions. This major tenet of the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tradition can be traced to the Rig Veda: *ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*—“Truth is one, sages call it by various names.” However, Sri Ramakrishna revitalized this dictum with his profound corollary: “As many people, so many paths”—a truth based on his own experience. Ramakrishna had actually practiced the various conflicting sects within Hinduism—the paths of dualism, qualified nondualism, and nondualism—all to their culmination. He then went on to practice to its fruition Islam; he received the vision of Christ; he understood the subtleties of Buddhist philosophy and practice; and he honored the Sikh and Jain gurus. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna’s acceptance of all spiritual traditions was not mere lip service; it was based on his nondual realization—the thread that tied together all the major religions of the world in one unified garland.

Sri Ramakrishna clarified this truth by explaining how pond water is called by different names—*jal*, *pani*, aqua—yet each name depicts the same water. Swami Vivekananda further illuminated Ramakrishna’s experience-based message of religious harmony by adding his own profound corollary: “Unless there is unity at the universal heart, we cannot understand variety.”<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, Sri Ramakrishna’s lifestyle was universal; he modeled both the ideal householder and monk. Though Ramakrishna received sannyasa from Tota Puri, he also lived a noble householder’s life, married to his virgin wife, Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, who, after Ramakrishna’s *mahasamadhi*, was considered the *Sangha Mata*, “Mother of the Ramakrishna Order.” Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings molded—and continue to mold—both monastics and lay devotees throughout the world today.

Third, Sri Ramakrishna’s universal message integrated the four main yogas, or paths to the Divine, within Hinduism. He taught that the paths of bhakti and jnana (devotion and knowledge), raja yoga (mind control and meditation), and karma yoga (selfless action) are supplementary—not contradictory paths—each broadening and deepening a seeker’s spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna explained: “Innumerable are the ways that lead to God. There are the paths of jnana, of karma, and of bhakti”<sup>3</sup> and “The aim of raja yoga is the attainment of devotion (bhakti), ecstatic love, knowledge (jnana), and renunciation.”<sup>4</sup>

Ramakrishna’s universal approach to these four yogas inspired Vivekananda to compile and author the four yogas, *Bhakti Yoga*, *Karma Yoga*, *Raja Yoga*, and *Jnana Yoga*, which today form the four pillars of spiritual practice in the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tradition. These four yogas are a holistic approach to spirituality. Each yoga corresponds to one of the four aspects of an individual’s psycho-

physical being: one's emotions (bhakti yoga), active life (karma yoga); contemplative nature (raja yoga), and analytical mind (jnana yoga).

Fourth, Swami Vivekananda's four yogas are also universal masterpieces. Not only do they gather and clearly systematize core universal principles, teachings, and practices within Hinduism, but they are also designed to be applicable to aspirants of other spiritual traditions of the world. In fact, initiated members at our Vedanta centers in the West include practicing or nonpracticing Christians, Jews, and even Muslims.

Furthermore, Vivekananda's teachings are a commentary on Ramakrishna's universal message of religious harmony. He exhorts us to look past external forms in which truths are clad—their scriptures, mythologies, philosophies, and rituals—to what he called “the internal soul of every religion.”<sup>5</sup> Vivekananda taught that each religious tradition takes up one angle or aspect of the universal truth and devotes itself to embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. Hence the world religions can only add—never subtract from universal truth—as they progress from “lower truth to higher truth”<sup>6</sup>

Swami Vivekananda took the message of the harmony of religions to the Chicago Parliament of the World's Religions, which then inspired—and continues to inspire—Westerners with the message of unity in diversity: “Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.”<sup>7</sup> Thus Swami Vivekananda is considered “the Pioneer of the Interfaith Dialogue Movement,”<sup>8</sup> whom the Smithsonian Institute recognizes as

having “left an indelible mark on America’s spiritual development.”<sup>9</sup>

Fifth, not only was Swami Vivekananda universal in being the first to take Vedanta beyond India’s borders, but he gave his highest teachings in the West. The swami wrote to his brother disciple: “I love India no doubt, but my visions are being cleared every day.... What is India or England or America to us? We are the servant of that God who by the ignorant is called man. *He who pours water at the root, waters the whole tree.*”<sup>10</sup> Vivekananda’s was a World Teacher; his mission in the West was to water the whole tree of humanity. How? By disseminating Vedanta in America, a land of immigrants which includes Jews, Christians, Muslims, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Indians—many of the latter who discover Vedanta in America rather than in their homeland of India.

Sixth, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda expand Vedanta’s breadth and depth to mean not only “universal” and “holistic” but also a tradition that is both ancient and modern. They taught through their lives the interconnectivity of all life and oneness. Sri Ramakrishna was so in tune with all of life, that one day when he saw a man walking across a distant field of grass, he writhed in pain as if someone had trampled his chest. In fact, bruises actually appeared on his chest.<sup>11</sup> This state of oneness arises when *brahmajnanis*, knowers of Brahman, experience that spiritual realm in which they embody the whole universe.

Swami Vivekananda, who modeled both ancient and modern methods of teaching, reintroduced the simple, direct approach of the Vedic rishi—to see the world as spiritually alive. The swami took some of his Western disciples into nature. At Camp Taylor in northern California, he built a fire on a spit of sand by a stream and his disciples sat around it at night as he told ancient stories of

Sukadeva and Vyasa. When it came time for meditation, the swami simply stated: “You may meditate on whatever you wish, but I shall meditate on the heart of a lion. That gives strength”<sup>12</sup> We may ask, “Why such a nature-driven meditation?” But today we see how contemporary Americans find this particular meditation so strengthening and therapeutic in times of stress, distress, or despondency. It is also a guided meditation that even young children in Vedanta Sunday schools love to hear and try to practice.

Seventh, Sri Ramakrishna’s and Swami Vivekananda’s universality removed all distinction between secular and sacred. Vivekananda boldly stated: “All knowledge is Veda.”<sup>13</sup> Here, in a masterstroke the swami lifts up the word *Vedanta* to mean not only the Vedic religion, philosophy, or even the Upanishads but spirituality and spirituality alone—a spirituality that can draw wisdom from nature and all creatures, the sciences, and the arts. By undergoing and flourishing within any of these disciplines, Vivekananda promises us that we can reach the same goal as when we practice ritual worship, prayer, and other spiritual practices. Sri Ramakrishna taught M., the recorder of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, how to write; Girish Ghosh, the famous dramatist, how to act; Nag Mahashay, the physician, how to serve. Sri Ramakrishna teaches us all how to live in the world as a maid servant and how to serve others as the living god.

Once in his room at the Dakshineswar Kali temple compound, near Kolkata, Sri Ramakrishna went into ecstasy and divulged to his close devotees: “Who are we to feel compassion for others? Not compassion for others, but service to them as manifestations of God.”<sup>14</sup> Hearing this profound teaching, Naren, the future Vivekananda, vowed: “I shall proclaim this grand truth to the world.”

The swami's greatest work, *Karma Yoga*, teaches us how to transform all work into worship—how to sanctify all our actions. From Vivekananda we learn that karma yoga as *seva yoga* removes any false compartmentalization between the secular (social service) and the sacred (Self-realization). Our spiritual arena can be our temple, church, or synagogue, our workplace, and our home.

Seva yoga has three stages. First, we learn to work *and* worship, wherein the two acts are separate. We begin to work as an outward activity, by giving service to others in the world; and our worship is an inward activity—doing good to oneself in a place of worship. The next stage is work *as* worship—Vivekananda's ideal of service in daily life. This stage de-compartmentalizes the secular and the sacred by directing us to try to see God in those served and offer every action as worship—whether inside or outside our temple or church. The third stage is Vivekananda's culmination of service: work *is* worship. By serving others as the Atman, the living God, we evolve spiritually to experience first-hand Vivekananda's karma yoga *as* nothing less than jnana yoga.<sup>15</sup>

By practicing this goal, we can experience our own true nature, *ananda*, bliss itself, within our self and others—with eyes wide open. Then not only do we, the giver, feel fulfilled, but the recipient also feels elevated. In this way, karma yoga acts as a universal prescription for well-being.

In conclusion, the universal message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda is broad, deep, and multi-faceted. First, the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tenet of religious harmony is their recognition of a universal heart at the core of every religious tradition—and the paths of dualism, qualified nondualism, and nondualism as various rungs on ladder to Truth.

Second, Ramakrishna exhibited a universal lifestyle—both the ideal monk and the ideal householder. Swami Vivekananda's

lifestyle was also universal in that he transcended nation and caste as the first Hindu to travel outside India to broadcast Vedanta to the world—and was thus barred from some temples in India. Vivekananda ate our food, wore our dress, spoke our language, loved our country and its women and men as his very own.

Third and fourth, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda taught a holistic and universal approach to spiritual life by utilizing all four yogas within Hinduism. Vivekananda went on to encourage all spiritual seekers to yoke each of the four aspects of our psyche to the goal of spiritual self-development. We can turn our emotions into devotion to God, actions into selfless service, mind into an instrument of self-introspection and meditation, and intellect into a discriminative faculty of self-enquiry.

Fifth, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda are World Teachers. The four yogas, so clearly laid out, are universal in application and are available and relevant to *any* seeker from *any* spiritual tradition. In the West Vivekananda's teachings of the harmony of religions, oneness, and unity in diversity sunk into Americans' collective consciousness. Soon after arriving in Dallas, Texas, America's conservative Bible Belt, Paul, the Vedanta center's next-door neighbor, who was Southern Baptist, asked me, "What do you believe in?"

"The harmony of religions," I replied, "All religions lead to the same truth."

I was astonished to see Paul pause, then nod, "Yes, I believe that too."

Sixth, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda revitalized Hinduism; they expanded its breadth and depth to include an all-inclusive tradition that is both ancient and modern.

Seventh, Swami Vivekananda's karma yoga, which includes serving the living god, expands our temple to include not only our home and our workplace but *every* place. Along with this message is the Vivekananda's expanded meaning of "Vedanta" to include all knowledge and therefore all types of work. In this context, Sister Nivedita's "Introduction" to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* – summarizes this final universal message of Swami Vivekananda, Sri Ramakrishna's greatest commentator:

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....

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.

This is universal message of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

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12. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West, New Discoveries: A New Gospel*, vol. 5 (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1987), 150.
13. "Is Vedanta the Future Religion?" CW 8:136.
14. See *His Eastern and Western Disciples, The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979), 139 for the unedited version.
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## Leaves from an Ashrama 66

### Discovery of a Stable Perch

Swami Vidyatmananda

**A**s an inhabitant of the present age, I look back to the man of, say, the Thirteenth Century and reflect on how lucky he was. For him all matters of what to think were settled. The universe was orderly. God's nature was known, as also His wishes for His creatures. Such certitude must have given beings repose and joy.

In contrast, we of today can perceive no scheme, no order, in anything, and are forced to pass our days in uncertainty and tension. The great issues are subject to question--God, purpose of life, morality. It must be painful to be a conscientious Catholic at the present hour. The Church's position was: We have the truth; follow it and all will be well. Today, what a brutal change! Here is a quote picked at random from *The Critic*, published by the Thomas More Association of Chicago: We are no longer capable of caring what the papacy or the national hierarchy or even our own bishop says or does.

For the past two hundred years or so it has seemed that the emergence of new disciplines might provide new certainties more defensible than the old ones in philosophy, political and social sciences, education, the arts of mental healing, and especially the physical sciences. But the certainties which emerge turn out to be fleeting. Conclusions considered promising are overthrown by newer findings. And worse, inside new truths there often seem to lurk invalidating menaces. Unexpected results or side effects materialize, to put the new answer in jeopardy.

There is, of course, the position of the existentialist to fall back on: Nothing is sure; there is no purpose. The sole certainty is

uncertainty. But man must carry on bravely nevertheless. In theory, perhaps all right. But in practice, man wearies of nihilism and aches for rest, certainty.

Is there then nowhere to subsist? Lately I believe I have discovered a small perch of stability large enough to stand on. It is this: Brahman alone is real; all the rest is unreal. It seems to me that this is a position compatible with reason, which at the same time provides some comfort. All the rest, which seems to make so little sense, is done away with. Yet we are not left without prospects. This formula grants that we can never establish order in the world of maya (the contingent nature of so-called lawfulness is being recognized even in the physical sciences), but claims that at a different level of consciousness a vast orderliness and meaning are accessible.

One of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna was once asked to write something for the Order's magazine. The young monk who was editor gave the swami a fresh notebook and pencil and said that he would be back some days later to collect the finished article. When he returned, the swami held out the notebook, all the pages as blank as before, explaining in an apologetic tone: I really tried, but as soon as I started to write, I arrived at the conclusion: Brahman alone is real: all the rest is unreal. I couldn't think of any words to put ahead of the ending.

Our experience has been just the reverse. We have had all the words that go before, but no conclusion. But I see that one can work the other way around. Start with the conclusion. Whether we shall be able to put some words before it or not won't really matter.

## **Programme for January - February 2019**

Sunday discourses begin after a brief period of meditation  
at the  
**Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End at 4:30 pm**

Jan	1	Kalpatarua Day Talk by Swami Sarvasthananda	
Jan	6	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 24	Swami Sarvasthananda
Jan	13	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 25	Swami Sarvasthananda
Jan	20	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 26	Swami Sarvasthananda
Jan	27	Swami Vivekananda's Puja	
Feb	3	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 27	Swami Sarvasthananda
Feb	10	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 28	Swami Sarvasthananda
Feb	17	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 29	Swami Sarvasthananda
Feb	24	Day Retreat	

### **Day Retreat**

With Swami Sarvasthananda and Swami Tripurananda  
at the Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on 24<sup>th</sup> February  
from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

Note: Children are not allowed at the Retreat.

### **Swami Vivekananda's Puja**

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> January at Bourne End at **3:30 pm**

### **Fortnightly Saturday Class - Isha Upanishad by Swami Sarvasthananda**

5<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> January

Time 4:00 p.m to 5:30 p.m

Venue: Sattavis Patidar Centre, 40 Avenue, Wembley, HA9

Negative thoughts weaken men. Do you not find that where parents are constantly taxing their sons to read and write, telling them they will never learn anything, and calling them fools and so forth, the latter do actually turn out to be so in many cases? If you speak kind words to boys and encourage them, they are bound to improve in time...If you can give them positive ideas, people will grow up to be men and learn to stand on their own legs. In language and literature, in poetry and the arts, in everything we must point out not the mistakes that people are making in their thoughts and actions, but the way in which they will gradually be able to do these things better. Pointing out mistakes wounds a man's feelings. We have seen how Shri Ramakrishna would encourage even those whom we considered as worthless and change he very course of their lives thereby! His very method of teaching was a unique phenomenon... In matters physical, mental, and spiritual -- in everything we must give men positive ideas and never hate anybody. It is your hatred of one another that has brought about your degradation. Now we shall have to raise men by scattering broadcast only positive thoughts. First we must raise the whole Hindu race in this way and then the whole world. That is why Shri Ramakrishna incarnated. He never destroyed a single man's special inclinations. He gave words of hope and encouragement even to the most degraded of persons and lifted them up.

Swami Vivekananda

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What we really want is head and heart combined. The heart is great indeed; it is through the heart that come the great inspirations of life. I would a hundred times rather have a little heart and no brain, than be all brains and no heart. Life is possible, progress is possible for him who has heart, but he who has no heart and only brains dies of dryness. At the same time we know that he who is carried along by his heart alone has to undergo many ills, for now and then he is liable to tumble into pitfalls. The combination of heart and head is what we want. I do not mean that a man should compromise his heart for his brain or vice versa, but let everyone have an infinite amount of heart and feeling, and at the same time an infinite amount of reason. Is there any limit to what we want in this world? Is not the world infinite? There is room for an infinite amount of feeling, and so also for an infinite amount of culture and reason. Let them come together without limit; let them be running together, as it were, in parallel lines each with the other.

Swami Vivekananda



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