

# Swami Vivekananda—The Master Yogi

## *Some Thoughts on Swamiji's Personality*

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### The Divine in the Human

Swami Vivekananda was a phenomenon. It is very difficult, maybe even impossible, to encompass his personality within narrow limits of all personality definitions. As Swamiji himself told his brother disciple, Swami Premananda, on the last day of his mortal life:

If there were another Vivekananda, he would have understood what Vivekananda has done!<sup>1</sup>

And lest this appear as an overconfident boast, he added that if Sri Ramakrishna, his guru, wants, he could create hundreds of such Vivekanandas at will!

It is now well accepted that Swamiji was a divine personality in a human form, as his own guru had once admitted. But without an understanding of the human side of Swamiji's personality, one can hardly appreciate his divine qualities. An attempt has been made here to bring forth his human personality in order to highlight his divine nature.

The life of Swami Vivekananda is a study in the evolution of a Yogi. In today's parlance, the word Yogi usually stands for a person who has learnt a good number of *asanas*, *pranayamas*, and is an expert in other practices such as *bandhas*, *mudras* and *kriyas*. Obviously, this is too narrow an interpretation of the word. The proper definition of the word yogi is to

be found in the sixth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, verses 20-23.

That state in which the chitta, with its movements restrained by the practice of Yoga, finds rest; in which is experienced the joy of Spirit born of the higher mind intuiting the Spirit; in which the Yogi experiences that endless bliss which is beyond the ken of the senses but is intuited by the purified intellect; wherein established, one does not waver from the Truth; having obtained which no other gain is considered as greater; remaining in which one is not shaken even by the heaviest of afflictions; know that severance of connection with pain as what is designated as Yoga.<sup>2</sup>

A true yogi, as stated above, is 'established within'. In a sense, all great persons are yogis. Swamiji said in his lectures on *Raja Yoga*,

These prophets were not unique; they were men as you or I. They were great Yogis. They had gained this superconsciousness, and you and I can get the same. They were not peculiar people. The very fact that one man ever reached that state, proves that it is possible for every man to do so. Not only is it possible, but every man must, eventually, get to that state, and that is religion. Experience is the only teacher we have. We may talk and reason all our lives, but we shall not understand a word of truth, until we experience it ourselves. You cannot hope to make



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a man a surgeon by simply giving him a few books. You cannot satisfy my curiosity to see a country by showing me a map; I must have actual experience. Maps can only create curiosity in us to get more perfect knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

### Evolution of Swamiji as a Yogi

There cannot be a better illustration for this definition of Yoga than the life of Swami Vivekananda himself. Swamiji was a great yogi. But how did this come about? According to Sister Nivedita,<sup>4</sup> there were three important factors that shaped the personality of Swamiji—his literary education in English and Sanskrit, his guru Sri Ramakrishna and his comprehensive knowledge of his motherland, making him a saint and a patriot at the same time. There have been several other factors also, like the influence exerted by his parents and teachers, but these three are the foremost.

Of these three also, it is the training he received from his guru that played the most significant role in the shaping of his personality. At the time when young Narendra (the future Vivekananda) met Sri Ramakrishna for the first time in Dakshineswar, he was a young man of about 19 years, still a student at college. His earlier life had been shaped first by his mother, followed later by his father.

Of his mother he proudly declared on many occasions, 'I am indebted to my mother for the efflorescence of my knowledge.'<sup>5</sup> And about the practical wisdom of his father, he was always appreciative. It is said that when he was still young, he had asked his father once: 'What have you done for me?' Instantly his father replied, 'Go and look into the mirror.' Another time when Naren came to his father for instruction in the ways of the world, asking him what were the elements of real good manners. 'Never show surprise!' said the father.<sup>6</sup>

Though brought up in a rather conservative environment, with a little influence of Persian culture thrown in, Naren never lost his independence of thinking for himself. This led him eventually to a study of western literature and philosophy, which prompted him to have a critical look at his own inherited and acquired norms and beliefs. Doubts arose in his mind, leading to mental conflicts. Mere intellectual knowledge did not satisfy him. The guidance he received from Brahmo leaders of those days like Devendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen could not satisfy him. He was looking for someone who could tell him clearly whether God really existed or not. This was the frame of his mind when he visited Sri Ramakrishna in Dakshineswar.

It was a set of fortuitous circumstances that made this happen. He heard the name of Sri Ramakrishna for the first time in his life from William Hastie, the Principal of Scottish Church College, when he was still a student there. He first met Sri Ramakrishna in the house of Surendranath Mitra briefly, where he captured Sri Ramakrishna's heart by his soulful singing. But, it was the possibility of being forced into marriage by his parents that finally brought him to Ramachandra Dutta, a distant uncle and devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, and through him to Sri Ramakrishna himself.

The story of his first three meetings with Sri Ramakrishna is too well-known for it to be recounted here. Only we could refer to what Swamiji recalled later once,

He [Sri Ramakrishna] used the most simple language, and I thought, 'Can this man be a great teacher?' I crept near him and asked him the question which I had asked so often: 'Have you seen God, sir?' 'Yes, I see Him just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense.' 'God can be realized,' he went on; 'one can see and talk to Him as I am seeing and talking to you. But who

cares? People shed torrents of tears for their wife and children, for wealth or property, but who does so for the sake of God? If one weeps sincerely for Him, He surely manifests Himself'. That impressed me at once. For the first time I found a man who dared to say that he had seen God, that religion was a reality to be felt, to be sensed in an infinitely more intense way than we can sense the world.<sup>7</sup>

The events that followed made a deep impression on Narendra, so much so that he felt assured that he had at last met the one person who would satisfy all his doubts and lay them to rest forever. Thus started the training of young Naren at the hands of his great Guru. We have only pale glimpses into this process, though the details were not revealed either by himself or by his Guru. One can only surmise what must have happened by looking at the end product, the integral personality that Swamiji became.

### **Mahavakya of Personality Development**

Many statements of Swamiji have become very popular and are widely quoted. One of his most popular quotations is from his book *Raja Yoga*:

- ❖ Each soul is potentially divine.
- ❖ The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal.
- ❖ Do this either by work, or worship, or by psychic control, or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and be free.
- ❖ This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.<sup>8</sup>

These were not words repeated parrot-like from the teachings of his Guru. These reflect in a way what Swamiji himself practised, and which contributed to the growth of his personality. Let us take a closer look at this aspect of his life.

Swamiji was born in one of the richest families of Kolkata. He had everything going his way—academic brilliance, an extraordinary memory, a wonderful voice that enchanted everyone, an athletic body, and loving parents and siblings. Though he felt for others but would argue, first with his father and later, with Sri Ramakrishna that if people are poor, it is because they are lazy. It needed a bitter experience for him to understand this. This was provided by the Divine Mother on 24 February 1884, when She snatched away his father from the family. Naren now found himself and his family bankrupt and ruined. Then followed hard days, and gradually Naren saw the obverse side of life. This made him extremely sensitive to others' needs and sufferings. He said later in his life,

May I be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls — and above all, my God the wicked, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship.<sup>9</sup>

Like Buddha, his entire life was spent in conveying the message of service to God in man, to people at all levels, including members of royal families.

Swamiji embodied in himself a complete harmony of four yogas he taught. He was at once, a jnana yogi, a bhakti yogi, karma yogi and a Raja yogi.

As a Jnani, Swamiji was a master indeed. With his keen intellect, analytical and rational way of thinking, his deep knowledge of the original Sanskrit texts, Swamiji was eminently qualified for the practice and preaching of Jnana Yoga. This is well reflected in his several lectures on the subject, whose collection has been published in the form of the book *Jnana Yoga*. These lectures amply demonstrate his

mastery over the subject. There has been hardly any description of Maya so succinct and precise as in these lectures.

When we look at Swamiji he apparently looks to be always a greater teacher of Vedanta, speaking of *viveka* (discrimination) and *vairagya* (dispassion). But there was an ocean of bhakti (devotion) beneath the apparent stress on stern viveka-vairagya. This inner treasure became apparent when, at the instance of Sri Ramakrishna, he went to pray to Divine Mother for fulfilling his worldly requirements, and ended up asking only for pure love for Her Holy Feet!

Swamiji's devotional core was generally hidden but revealed itself on certain occasions. His unseen devotion burst out of its hiding when he visited Kashmir in 1898. His Life records this experience thus:

The Swami retired abruptly on September 30 to the Coloured Springs of Kshir-Bhavani (or Kheer Bhawani), leaving strict instructions that no one was to follow him. It was not until October 6 that he returned. Before this famous shrine of the Mother he daily performed Homa, and worshipped Her with offerings of Kshira or Kheer (thickened milk) made from one maund of milk, rice, and almonds. He told his beads like any humble pilgrim; and, as a special Sadhana, every morning he worshipped a Brahmin pandit's little daughter as Uma Kumari, the Divine Virgin. He began to practise the sternest austerities. It seemed as though he would tear off all the veils that had come upon his soul through years of work and thought, and again be a child before the Divine Mother.

When he returned to Srinagar, he appeared before his disciples a transfigured presence, writes Nivedita. He entered their houseboat, his hands raised in benediction; then he placed some marigolds that he had offered to the Mother, on the head of each of them. 'No more "Hari Om!" It is all 'Mother' now!' he said, sitting down. . .

Now it is only 'Mother! Mother!' . . . ?' . . . I am only a little child!"<sup>10</sup>

Several of Swamiji's disciples and brother disciples were a witness to this.

If one looks at Swamiji as a karma yogi, one is astonished to see his enormous capacity to work, and yet remain detached. He travelled extensively, mingled with people and inspired a revolutionary change in many fields of life. He was particularly a model for the patriots and those interested in the welfare of down-trodden millions. He told his young disciples,

I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed.<sup>11</sup>

According to Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji was *dhyanasiddha*, a person accomplished in meditation even from birth. Hence it was easy for Sri Ramakrishna to train him so that Swamiji became a meditator par excellence. His mastery over the science of meditation is well displayed by his masterly commentary on the Patanjali Yoga Sutras.<sup>12</sup> He dictated the text to one of his disciples. It is said that he would meditate before dictating the commentary on any sutra, so much so that at least certain parts of this commentary can be considered to be revelatory.

It is thus seen that Swamiji had equal proficiency in all the four Yogas. It is no wonder that in his own lifetime many people, including many westerners, saw in him an extraordinary spark of Divinity. They had never seen, combined in one individual, this kind of a comprehensive approach to spirituality.

### Swamiji's Personality

A remarkable feature of Swamiji's personality was the care and attention he used to bestow on even the most ordinary of activities. While he encouraged his brother monks to collect donations for the Math, he

cautioned them at the same time that they will be dealing with money not their own, but given by the public. Hence, they were responsible for keeping a perfect record, and render the accounts if asked for. When he was accused by a rich western disciple of not using the funds properly, he produced the accounts in all details and showed that not only was he careful in spending the money, but also kept a perfect record. Another instance of his meticulous way of doing things was the care with which he drafted the byelaws of the Ramakrishna Order. Such instances can be multiplied several fold.

In his lectures on Karma Yoga, Swamiji says in one place:<sup>13</sup>

If you really want to judge of the character of a man, look not at his great performances. Every fool may become a hero at one time or another. Watch a man do his most common actions; those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man. Great occasions rouse even the lowest of human beings to some kind of greatness, but he alone is the really great man whose character is great always, the same wherever he may be.

To get a peep into Swamiji's personality, let us recall here an account of Sister Devamata:

I reached the hall twenty minutes before the hour. It was already over half full. It was not large, however—a long, narrow room with a single aisle and benches reaching from it to the

wall; a low platform holding reaching-desk and chair at the far end; and a flight of stairs at the back. The hall was on the second storey and these stairs gave the only way of access to it—audience and speaker both had to make use of them. By the time three o'clock had arrived, hall, stairs, window-sills, and railings, all were crowded to their utmost capacity. Many even were standing below, hoping to catch a faint echo of the words spoken in the hall above.

A sudden hush, a quiet step on the stairs, and Swami Vivekananda passed in stately erectness up the aisle to the platform. He began to speak; and memory, time, place, people, all melted away. Nothing was left but a voice ringing through the void. It was as if a gate had swung open and I had passed out on a road leading to limitless attainment. The end of it was not visible; but the promise of what it would be shone through the thought and flashed through the personality of the one who gave it. He stood there—prophet of infinitude.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

A human being looking for his or her own personal development needs a role model, without whose help the path of progress may become very thorny. This is all the more true in the case of young people, who are right now growing in a highly confused and competitive world, subject to severe challenges. They cannot do better than choosing Swami Vivekananda as their role model and guide. □



### References

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| 4. cf. CW, 1: xvii   | 5. <i>Life</i> , 1: 21      |
| 6. <i>Life</i> , 1.44  | 7. <i>Life</i> , 1: 77      |
| 8. CW, 1: 124  | 9. CW, 5: 137               |
| 10. <i>Life</i> , 2: 381-2   | 11. CW, 5.17                |
| 12. CW, 1: 122-313   | 13. CW, 1: 29               |
| 14. <i>Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda</i> , Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, pp. 122-23 |                             |