

INTEGRAL YOGA IN SWAMI VIVEKANANDA (*)

Swami Paratparananda¹

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To understand the profundity of the life of a spiritual luminary of many facets like Swami Vivekananda is extremely difficult and requires years of deep study. Every time one engages in such an attempt, a new horizon, as it were, reveals itself, and one finds really how little one can comprehend about this great life. Again, no human being is born with a mind like *tabula rasa*. A child comes into this world with a store of impressions of the past experience and knowledge. So the spiritual grandeur that we see in Swami Vivekananda was there in its seed form from his very birth. Therefore, to have a comprehensive idea of how the yogas are combined harmoniously in him, we will have to begin from the very start, from his boyhood. Also, we will be compelled to refer to the estimation of him by his Master, Sri Ramakrishna, to have a true picture of his spiritual magnitude, for, as the Master used to say, only a jeweller can evaluate correctly the price of a diamond. And who else in this age could be a better jeweller in the religious field than Sri Ramakrishna?

In the biography of Swami Vivekananda, by his Eastern and Western Disciples, we come across three incidents of his boyhood days, which show with what ease he could lose himself in a given idea, totally unaware of the surroundings. Hearing the tales from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata from his mother, as a boy, he was captivated by the life of Rama to such a great extent that one day he bought an image of Sita-Rama and, installing it in a room on the terrace of the house, he, along with a little brahmin boy, sat for meditation in front of the image after securing the door from inside. Soon the people in the house missed Naren (as Swami Vivekananda was called in those days) and a search was begun which at last led to the little attic. 'The searchers,' say the biographers, 'knocked and shouted, but there was no response. In great fright, fearing that something had happened to Naren, they forced the door and found the two boys seated in deep meditation before the flower-decked image.' He was then perhaps five or six years of age. This playing at meditation aroused in him deep spiritual emotions and in this pastime the boys of the neighbourhood sometimes joined him. One day when they had sat for meditation there appeared a cobra, on seeing which the other boys, shouting a warning to Naren, ran away from the place. But Naren remained where he was. The serpent stayed about for a

¹ Swami Paratparananda was an Editor of Vedanta Kesari magazine (1962-1967) and the spiritual leader of Ramakrishna Ashrama, Argentina and Ramakrishna Vedanta Ashrama, Brazil (1973-1988).

while and then slowly crawled away and disappeared. When his parents later on asked him why he too had not left the place, he seems to have replied "I knew nothing of the snake, or anything else. I was feeling inexpressible bliss."¹

The third incident took place at a much later period, when he was fourteen. In the year 1877 his father went to Raipur and arranged that his family follow him under the charge of Naren later on. The journey was long and a stretch of it was through dense forests, to be done in bullock-carts on unfrequented roads. The party had been travelling several days in this manner and Naren was charmed with the beauty and grace the Almighty had bestowed on the rugged earth. An indescribable bliss filled Naren's heart on one particular day when he contemplated the "lofty hills on either side of the road, the verdant trees and creepers laden with flowers and joyous with the warbling of birds of variegated colours. Suddenly his eyes alighted on a very large hive in a cleft in one of the hills. His mind in thinking of that colony of bees was soon lost in wonder at the majesty and power of the Divine Providence. Lost to all outward consciousness he lay in the bullock-cart – how long he could not remember."²

These three incidents show his inherent capacity to concentrate the mind on one single theme to the exclusion of all other thoughts. And this is the very power that enables man to reach God, realize Him. All our efforts are to reach this stage of concentration, for without it, it is impossible to attain the Highest.

There was another peculiar phenomenon which was natural in Naren. Every night brought him a singular type of vision. Strange was the manner in which he was ushered into sleep. As soon as he lay down and closed his eyes there appeared between his brows a wonderful light that changed its colour and which went on expanding until it burst and bathed his whole body with its brilliance, and as the mind occupied itself in contemplating this phenomenon, the body fell asleep. The boy Naren thought that it was a common feature with all human beings and to satisfy himself regarding this, he asked one of his friends if he had such an experience. When the friend replied that he did not have, Naren asked him to observe well just before he fell asleep. This phenomenon remained with Naren until his last days, though in the latter part of his life, it was neither so frequent nor so intense. All these things show us to what deep a state of meditation had the soul of Naren attained even as a boy and how natural it had become with him. Later on, when Naren, in his search of a man who had seen God, approached Sri Ramakrishna, the Master once asked him: 'My boy, do you see a light when you go to sleep?' Naren said: 'Yes, sir.' Sri Ramakrishna exclaimed: 'Ah! It is true. This one is a Dhyana Siddha – an adept in meditation even from his very birth.'³

Meditation is an important limb of spiritual life. All the three yogas, viz., Jnana, Raja and Bhakti yogas include it in their discipline. It consists in directing the mind uninterruptedly to one single object. Narada in his Bhakti Sutras, referring to the spiritual practices which lead one to attain devotion, mentions *avyavarta bhajana*, uninterrupted loving service, as one of the means, and what this loving service signifies he makes clear in the subsequent sutra: 'By hearing and singing the glory of the Lord, even while engaged in the ordinary activities of life.'⁴ An aspirant following the bhakti yoga tries to remember the Lord by engaging himself in the repetition of the *mantra*, His name, and at the same time trying to keep before his mind's eye the form of his Chosen Deity. When the mind flows, as it were, like a stream, without a break, towards the object of its adoration, there develops in man a special power of concentration and subsequently of meditation. To the follower of Jnana yoga, meditation forms the chief discipline once he has acquired the power of discrimination between the Real and the unreal and a spirit of renunciation of enjoyment here and hereafter. For example, in the Upanishads we read 'Atman is to be seen,' and then immediately the means to attain this goal are mentioned 'Should be heard, cogitated upon and then meditated.'⁵ Also we come across a number of passages in the same Scriptures which recommend 'Upasana', which means worship, or meditation. In the Raja yoga it is the penultimate step, the next being Samadhi, or union with the Ideal, or the Absolute. Without this power to concentrate the mind with one-pointed devotion to God, realization is not possible. An ordinary human being requires a lifetime or several lives to gain this power, even if it be in a small measure. On the contrary we have seen how abundantly endowed was Swami Vivekananda with this capacity from his very boyhood. We are reminded here of the words of Sri Ramakrishna regarding some of his young disciples: 'Devotees like Rakhal, and Narendra may be called nityasiddhas. Their spiritual consciousness has been awake since their very birth. They assume human bodies only to impart spiritual illumination to others.'⁶ And the Master never erred in his judgment, for having attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi, he had the power to identify himself with the cosmic mind, which is the source of all creation, and thus could read the past, present and the future of the devotees who came to him, as if from an open book.

A description of Narendra by Sri Ramakrishna himself further explains the inherent nature of the former. 'Narendra entered this room,' says the Master, 'by the western door. He seemed careless about his body and dress, and unlike other people, unmindful of the external world. His eyes bespoke an introspective mind, as if some part of it were always concentrated upon something within. I was surprised to find such a spiritual soul coming from the material atmosphere of Calcutta. The

friends with whom he had come appeared to be ordinary young men with the usual tendencies towards enjoyment. He sang a few Bengali songs at my request. One of it was a common song of the Brahmo Samaj, which begins – ‘O my mind, go to your own abode. In the foreign land of this world why roam uselessly like a stranger!’ He sang the song with his whole heart and put such pathos in it that I could no longer control myself, but fell into an ecstatic mood.”⁷ This description speaks volumes for Narendra’s disregard for the things of the world, a quality of prime necessity for a life of renunciation.

In his very first meeting Sri Ramakrishna recognised Narendra as one who would spread his message in the world, as one whom he had seen in a vision. However, to reassure himself, the Master, by his divine touch induced Narendra on his second and third visits to dive deep into his soul and obtained all the information regarding the antecedents, as well as the future of the disciple. When he got answers that corroborated his visions, Sri Ramakrishna started training Narendra in a manner totally different from that of the other disciples. During the visits Naren paid to the Master, the latter would ask the disciple to read to him from the *Ashtavakra Samhita* or some such treatise on Advaita, with a view to familiarize him with its philosophy. For, Sri Ramakrishna had come to know through his visions and through the tests to which he submitted Narendra, that the path of this disciple of his was that of Knowledge. However, to Narendra, then a firm adherent of the Brahmo Samaj, which advocated worship of God without Form but with attributes, the philosophy of Advaita seemed to be nothing but heresy and he would argue: ‘It is blasphemous, for there is no difference between such philosophy and atheism. There is no greater sin in the world than to think of myself as identical with the Creator. I am God, you are God, these created things are God – what can be more absurd than this! The sages who wrote such things must have been insane.’ The Master would be amused at this bluntness but would only remark, ‘You may not accept the views of these seers. But how can you abuse them or limit God’s infinitude? Go on praying to the God of Truth and believe in any aspect of His which He reveals to you.’⁸ But Narendra did not accept these concepts easily. Whatever did not conform with the reason he considered as false and it was his nature to oppose falsehood. Consequently he never lost an opportunity to ridicule the Advaita philosophy.

Notwithstanding his resistance, Sri Ramakrishna persisted in speaking to Narendra about Advaita. One day, the Master tried to convince the disciple about the idea that the individual soul, Atman, was identical with Brahman, but without success. Narendra left the room and approaching Hazra began to ridicule and laugh at the idea, saying, “How can this be? This jug is God, this cup is God and we too are God: Nothing

can be more preposterous!" Hearing Narendra's laughter Sri Ramakrishna came out of his room in a semiconscious state and asking with a smile, "Hullo! what are you talking about?" touched Narendra and entered into Samadhi. The effect of the touch was amazing. Narendra himself describes: "The magic touch of the Master that day immediately brought about a wonderful change over my mind. I was stupefied to find that really there was nothing in the universe but God! I saw it clearly but kept silent, to see if the idea would last. But the impression did not abate in the course of the day. I returned home, but there too, everything I saw appeared to be Brahman...This state of things continued for some days. When I became normal again, I realized that I must have had a glimpse of the Advaita state. Then it struck me that the words of the scriptures were not false. Thenceforth I could not deny the conclusions of the Advaita philosophy."⁹ In this way gradually he was led from doubt to certainty, from all objective concepts of the Divinity to the awareness of the subjective nature of the Reality, beyond form, beyond thought, beyond the senses and beyond all relative good and evil. Thus was Narendra being trained by Sri Ramakrishna in the method of Jnana yoga. Narendra who was till then accustomed to pray and meditate according to the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj, had to give these up and take to a new method of meditation. For any other aspirant the task would have been formidable, but Narendra having the necessary capacity to isolate his mind from all thoughts which were not conducive to his mode of meditation, began with all his heart to pray, 'O God, be gracious and reveal to me Thy real nature which is the embodiment of Truth!' and then merge himself in deep meditation during the nights into the depths of his being to such an extent that he would feel a sort of intoxication, which would make it difficult for him to leave his seat. Sri Ramakrishna too taught him various types of meditation.

Though he respected the Master and held him in high esteem as a person of the greatest spiritual attainments, Narendra could not accept Sri Ramakrishna's view regarding God with form, a fundamental conception in the path of devotion, Bhakti yoga. But the Master, the first rate physician that he was in matters concerning spirituality, after minutely observing the physical features of the disciple, once remarked: 'Your eyes show that you are not a dry jnani. In you are blended tender devotion and deep knowledge.'¹⁰ And having recognised this fact Sri Ramakrishna was not going to allow this faculty go uncultivated, nor permit that the spiritual unfoldment of his favourite disciple be one-sided. Narendra once referred to the visions the Master had had of the Personal Deity, as hallucinations and Sri Ramakrishna felt greatly disturbed by this. He approached the Divine Mother and placed the matter before Her and set his mind at rest only when She assured him

that before long Naren would accept his visions as true. One day Sri Ramakrishna, tired of trying to convince his disciple about the efficacy of image-worship said, 'Why do you come here if you won't acknowledge my Mother?' To this Naren replied without the least hesitation, 'Must I accept Her simply because I come here?' 'All right,' said Sri Ramakrishna, 'ere long you shall not only acknowledge my Blessed Mother, but weep in Her name.'¹¹

And not much long after this, the day arrived. Narendra's father died suddenly, leaving the family in straitened circumstances. Not only was the family not provided with the means of sustenance, but there were also debts to be paid. Narendra tried to get an employment to feed the starving mother and brothers. To this end he did all that was honestly possible, but fortune did not smile on him. At last he thought of the Master, the one and only person who had not refused him any favour as yet. He went to Dakshineswar and entreated Sri Ramakrishna to pray to the Divine Mother for the removal of the sufferings of his family. The Master replied: 'My boy, I cannot ask such things. Why don't you yourself go and ask the Mother? All your hardships are due to your disregard for Her.' Narendra said: 'I do not know the Mother, please plead with Her for me.' Sri Ramakrishna said with great tenderness, 'My boy, I have told Her again and again, but as you do not accept Her, She does not listen to my prayer. Very well, today is Tuesday – go to the Kali temple tonight, prostrate yourself before the Mother and ask Her any boon you like. It shall be granted. She is Knowledge Absolute, the Inscrutable Power of Brahman, and by Her mere will has given birth to this world. Everything is in Her power to give.'¹² These instructions imparted at the proper moment filled Narendra with faith and devotion, as he himself acknowledges. He anxiously waited for the night and when at nine o'clock the Master asked him to go to the temple, he was overpowered with emotion and felt his legs unsteady. 'My heart was leaping' – related Swami Vivekananda later on – 'in anticipation, of the joy of beholding the living Goddess and hearing Her words. I was full of the idea. Reaching the temple, as I cast my eyes upon the image, I actually found that the Divine Mother was living and conscious, the Perennial Fountain of Divine love and Beauty.'¹³ He was caught in a surging wave of devotion and forgetting all about the trials and tribulations and the penury of the family, he prayed to the Mother for discrimination, knowledge and devotion. As Narada describes, 'Devotion is devoid of all attributes and free from all characteristic tendencies to selfish action,'¹⁴ and as he also affirms, 'Attaining that, one does not desire anything, neither grieves, nor hates.'¹⁵ Swami Vivekananda, when he felt the living presence of the Divine Mother, forgot all about the mundane things. That night Sri Ramakrishna sent him thrice to the

temple to ask for the removal of the poverty of his family, but Narendra could not force himself to ask of the Mother these things. Thus was Narendra introduced to the path of devotion. Later, in Cossipore, Sri Ramakrishna one day initiated him with the name of Rama, informing him that he himself had received it from his Guru. Consequently waves of emotion welled up in Narendra to such heights that towards the evening he started going round and round the house repeating the Lord's name in an excited voice. He had lost all outward consciousness and was in a highly ecstatic mood.

In those days Cossipore garden house was a place of intense *sadhana*, spiritual practices: Sri Ramakrishna sometimes would send the young disciple to meditate, sometimes would ask Naren to sing devotional songs, and Narendra also would urge his brother disciples to redouble their efforts to realize God, before the departure of the Master, for, he told them, that the disease of the Master was a serious one and that he might soon lay down the body. And he himself set the example. Once after spending several days at Cossipore, Narendra went home. The people there scolded him severely for neglecting his studies. He was then preparing to sit for the Law examination. Heeding their words he tried, but a terrible fear invaded his heart, as if to read was a horrible thing to do. He left the books and all and ran to Cossipore and did not stop until he reached the place. That night Sri Ramakrishna, though he could not talk due to the worsening of the disease, referring to the exalted state in which Narendra was, said in a whisper, 'There was a time when he did not believe in the Personal aspect of God. Now see how he pines for realization.' Those who have read the biography of Swami Vivekananda are well aware with what devotion he visited the cave of Amarnath and the temple of Kshirbhavani in Kashmir and what tremendous emotional effect these visits had on him. Sri Ramakrishna also had once remarked: 'Naren is all jnana without and bhakti within.' And every word of it proved to be true. Towards the end of his life, Swamiji spoke mostly of the Divine Mother.

Now we come to the most glorious moments of Narendra's life. It was in Cossipore that almost every disciple of the Master was blessed with one or other type of spiritual experience. Narendra who was hankering after the highest form of realization, one day complained to Sri Ramakrishna, 'All have been blessed by some class of experience. Let me, too, have something. When all have got it, shall I alone be left out?' Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Make some arrangements for your family, and you shall have all. What do you want?' Narendra replied: 'I wish to remain immersed in Samadhi for three or four days at a stretch — breaking it just to take food.' The Master remarked, 'You are a fool. There is a state even higher than that. Do you not sing, "Thou art all that there is?" Come

here after making some provision for your family, and you shall realize a state even higher than Samadhi.'¹⁶ As days passed Narendra's desire for realization increased a hundredfold. He began to spend more and more hours in meditation. One evening unexpectedly this vehement desire of his came to be fulfilled. He was meditating, when all of a sudden he felt a light behind his head, as if a bright torch were placed there. Gradually the light increased in luminosity and grew and finally appeared to burst. Then Narendra's mind merged in the light; what happened afterwards cannot be expressed in words, for this state was Nirvikalpa Samadhi, where all distinctions such as the meditator, the object of meditation and the process of meditation disappear, and the Atman, as it were, merges in itself, or unites with the Paramatman or Brahman. The Upanishads say 'Wherefrom the word along with the mind returns without comprehending, experiencing that bliss of Brahman, man fears nothing.'¹⁷ Again, 'By what can you know the Knower?'¹⁸

At the time in the room there were only Narendra and Copal the elder, meditating; all was perfect silence. Suddenly, the latter heard Narendra cry out, 'Gopalda, where is my body?' Partially gaining consciousness, Narendra was only aware of his head. The brother disciple, taken aback, replied, 'There it is,' and then looking at Narendra's rigid body ran to Sri Ramakrishna for help. He found the Master intensely calm but his countenance deeply serious, as though he knew what was passing in the adjacent room. In response to his request for help, Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Let him remain in that state for some time. He has teased me a long time for it.'¹⁹ When Narendra regained normal consciousness, he saw himself surrounded by his anxious brother disciples. He felt as if bathed in an ineffable bliss. His heart overflowed with ecstasy. Later, when he presented himself before the Master, the latter looked deep into his eyes and said, 'Well, the Mother has showed you everything. Now, as they keep the treasure in a box under lock and key, similarly, the realization you have had just now shall remain locked, and the key shall remain with me. You have work to do. When you would have finished the work, it will open again and you will once again know, as you have just now known.' Then he asked him to take care of his body for a few days and be selective as regards food and companions, accepting only the most pure. Thus did Swami Vivekananda's natural tendency towards introversion assist him in attaining the highest of the spiritual realizations, Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the final goal of Jnana yoga. No progress in this path is possible unless one transcends the body idea. Sri Sankara says in the Vivekachudamani: 'He who engaging himself only in taking care of the body, aspires to realize the Atman, is like the person who tries to cross a river grasping a crocodile, mistaking it for a log of wood.'²⁰ To go beyond the body consciousness is the *sine qua non*

of this yoga, and we have seen to what a great degree this power was developed in Swami Vivekananda, from his very childhood, and because of this he was able to realize the goal of Jnana yoga in such a short time.

We have referred earlier to the ease with which Narendra could lose himself in meditation. We also said that it is the penultimate step, according to Patanjali, of Raja yoga. We saw the Cossipore garden house transform itself into a place of great yajna, that of *sadhana*, service to the Guru and of spiritual experiences. Here it was, a few months before the event mentioned above occurred, that one day while meditating, Narendra, all of a sudden, felt a peculiar sensation in his heart. 'M' to whom Narendra was relating the incident said, 'It was the awakening of the Kundalini.' 'Probably it was,' replied Narendra, and added, 'I clearly perceived the Ida and Pingala nerves. I asked Hazra to feel my chest. Yesterday I saw the Master and told him about it.'²¹ Thus we see that Narendra guided by the Master was rapidly progressing in the disciplines of all yogas.

After Narendra realized Nirvikalpa Samadhi, Sri Ramakrishna had told him that experience would remain hidden, as long as Narendra had not finished the Mother's work. The work was to spread the message of the Master not only in India but also outside it. It was an all-comprehensive message and would rejuvenate the religion in all parts of the globe. For this purpose Sri Ramakrishna himself had banded the young men together and bound them with the cord of love. He specially charged Narendra to see that these boys did not go back to the world, but became instruments in spreading the life-giving message of the eternal religion. These were tremendous tasks, but Narendra faithfully carried them out in spite of the fact that he had to fight against heavy odds and encounter much opposition. In all these efforts the idea of personal gain, in the shape of riches, or name and fame never for a day entered his mind. Even as a wandering monk, soon after the passing away of the Master, he had tried many a time to retire to a secluded place and immerse in spiritual practices. But every time some one or other of the brother disciples whom the Master had left to his charge would fall ill and he would be compelled to give up his project and attend to their needs. To do the work that would benefit mankind as a whole and be not attached to the results thereof is what Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita terms as Karma yoga. He also says, 'He whose enjoyment is in the Atman, who is satisfied with the Atman and who is content in the Atman alone, has no duty. For such a man there is nothing to gain by action nor lose by inaction. Therefore, be unattached and do all the duties.'²² Here is the path of Karma yoga, but then Sri Krishna gives an example of one established in God, united with Him. He declares: 'O Partha, I have no duties whatsoever to perform in the three worlds, nor have I to attain

anything that I have not got, yet I engage myself in action.’²³ Only the Incarnations of God and their apostles can really do work without any motive, not even of attaining liberation. Swami Vivekananda was a true karma yogi, he did not care even for his personal liberation if he could be of service to humanity. He expressed as much in some of his letters to and talks with his disciples.

Thus we see in Swami Vivekananda a harmonious combination of all the yogas beautifully expressing themselves.

¹ The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples, page 13, 8th Edition, 1974.

² Ibid., p.21.

³ Ibid., p.46.

⁴ Narada Bhakti sutras 37.

⁵ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, IV.v.6.

⁶ Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. Published by Ramakrishna Math, Madras, VI Edition, 1974,p. 115.

⁷ The Life, pp.44-45.

⁸ Ibid., p.65.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 65-66.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 63-64.

¹² Ibid., p.95.

¹³ Ibid., 9.95.

¹⁴ N.B. Sutras,54.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.5.

¹⁶ Op. Cit., p.131.

¹⁷ Taittiriya Up., 2.9.

¹⁸ Br. Up. IV.v.15.

¹⁹ The Life, pp. 144-145.

²⁰ Vivekachudamani, 84.

²¹ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p.928.

²² Bhagavad Gita, III.17-19.

²³ Ibid., III,22.