

Swami Vivekananda: the Prophet of Vedanta

Om. A-sa-to ma sad gam-ma-ya. Ta-ma-so-ma jyo-tir gam-ma-ya. Mri-tyor ma a-mri-tam ga-ma-ya. Avir avir ma e-dhi. Rudra yat te dak-shi-nam mu-kham. Tena mam pahi nityam. Tena mam pahi nityam. Tena mam pahi nityam.

Lead us from the unreal to the Real. Lead us from darkness unto Light. Lead us from death to Immortality. Reveal to us Thy Resplendent Truth and evermore protect us, Oh Lord, by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face, by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face, by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face.

The subject of my talk this morning is: Swami Vivekananda, the prophet of Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda was born in 1863. He came to this country when he was about thirty years old in 1893. He had a good college education, but from his early boyhood, his heart was very much inclined to spiritual pursuits. He wandered in many places, came to many teachers, scholars, but nobody could satisfy him. The deeper questions that were disturbing his mind, could not be resolved by any scholar or [by] any religious man at that time-- around Calcutta of course. Calcutta was the city where he was born.

Eventually he met Sri Ramakrishna, a simple holy man without an education, but who had realized the highest spiritual truth in many ways. As you know his very well known utterance, "As many ways, so many paths." That means all religions lead eventually to the same destiny, namely God. So Vivekananda, whose name was Narendra, he met Sri Ramakrishna and asked him this question: "Sir, have you seen God?" And Sri Ramakrishna's prompt answer was, "Yes, my boy. I have seen God. I see Him as clearly as I see you and if you are interested, I can also help you to see God." That impressed him and he began to come to this holy man, to the temple of Dakshineswar, which was about four miles north of Calcutta.

So Narendra had the company of this holy man for about five years and this holy man, Sri Ramakrishna, discovered in this youth great potentiality for spiritual life. Not merely for his own spiritual fulfillment, but he saw that this young man, in time will be a source of peace and comfort and strength to many. He'll be a prophet and he will have to go abroad. He'll have to preach in many lands. That was [what] he saw in his vision. So he trained him, not merely for the boy's personal spiritual life, but trained him as a future instrument for the dissemination of the great spiritual wisdom of India. And so, Sri Ramkrishna died in 1886 and for some years, Narendra and some of his friends, young unmarried friends who were equally drawn to Sri Ramakrishna and had training under him, these young people gathered together, started a monastery and began to practice very intensely their spiritual life.

And Narendra, he traveled all over India in order to discover India – what real India is, what India's problems are. In order to have a direct comprehension of India, he traveled far, in this country, in all places. He met [in] many places rich and poor. By that time he had really developed a magnetic personality, just a young man of twenty-six. But from his face, beamed the light of knowledge, the light of compassion, the light of strength. And so, many maharajas in these

days, when they met him they were also very much attracted to this young man. So he was touring all over India, and then the news came that a Parliament of Religions was being organized in Chicago, where on that platform, representatives of different religions will come. So many of his friends, particularly some of the maharajas, encouraged him, "Do you please go as to represent Hinduism. And we shall bear the cost of your travel and all necessary expenses." But Vivekananda declined that. He said, "But if I go to represent India, it is the people of India, the masses of India, who should collect money and send me."

So by that time he had gathered around him a band of young people in south India, in Madras and these young people, they were college students or teachers, and like that, and they are very much enthused and they began to collect money from door to door. In this way money was collected and he sailed for America, but he arrived too early, because these young people they did not work quite systematically. They were – out of enthusiasm—so they did not really inquire when actually the Parliament of Religions would meet. That would [be] in September and they sent him in May. [Audience laughs.] So when he arrived he came via Vancouver, Canada and by Vancouver by rail he arrived in Chicago. He had some difficulties on the way. When he arrived he found: oh it was boiling heat, and it is so expensive, and the Parliament of Religions would come in September. He'll have to wait these three months – two months. So what to do? He was really embarrassed.

At one time, he thought, he would go back. But he was a strong man; he said, "No, I have come." Moreover before coming he had an intuition that Sri Ramakrishna, his master, had approval of his coming to this country. So his conscience was clean. He felt that, "I have not come for name or fame or my personal interest. I have come to represent my Motherland." So it so happened, some incidents happened to his favor and he came to Boston, which they said is much cheaper than in Chicago. So he came to Boston and a Harvard professor, he was so much impressed with him, he would say, "I would help you to go to Chicago. I'll write you..." He said, "I want some credentials, because I have no credentials. I am not coming as a **formal** messenger or representative. I have come... Some young people and they had not much knowledge. They have sent me. I... if you can give me a credential [it would help]." Then this professor told him... Let me find this in his biography. "To ask you, Swami for your credentials, is like asking the sun about its right to shine." Then he wrote a letter to one of his friends in Chicago and there this learned professor said, "Here is a man, more learned than all our learned professors put together."

So he came at the proper time in Chicago. At that time also he was in trouble because he was an inexperienced monk. The monks have no experience of secular life, you see. They are so foolish. (He laughs and audience joins him.) Because they leave their home at an early... before they have some, any experience of the world, they... like that. So even when, with his credentials, he came to Chicago, he found that he has lost his credentials. And he has no place to go and so he was sitting on the roadside near the lake, and

[he was] tired, exhausted. He came, arrived [the] previous night and he did not know. He was just thinking of God.

Then it so happened, a lady, an American lady, saw him from her house, from the upper floor, saw that a person [in] strange dress is sitting there. So she knew that a convention of a Parliament of Religions will be soon convened. And there will be many oriental delegates. So she was not surprised. She thought that he must be some oriental delegate. So she came down and talked with him. And in a few minutes she was impressed. This young man, though in this kind of strange dress, he has a power inside him. So she brought him to her home, introduced him to her daughters and herself took him to the Parliament's office and all things were then from that time, it was all in order. And then he had stayed one or two days in that lady's house, and then moved to the...where the place where the delegates were housed.

And [at] the Parliament, the first sitting was on the eleventh of September and there were so many delegates from all countries. So he was this... he was barely thirty then. He was nervous. He was feeling nervous. And the precedent was, the first session was the preliminary introduction of the delegates. A delegate would come and just speak a few minutes. There were seven thousand people and they were calling him. It is now your turn, sir; you come. He said, later, later, later. [He laughs.] See? Eventually, he could not refuse. He had to come. Then he came and he stood, then he, he addressed [the audience], "Sisters and brothers of America." That was his address.

Now just hearing these words, "sisters and brothers of America" the whole house was mad. They began to clapping – for five minutes clapping was going on. They felt a thrill, they...who is this? And he was more confused. "Why, have I done something wrong?" [Congregation laughs.] "Have I done something wrong?" But then he looked at the faces of the people and he found they are very sympathetic and friendly. They are really glad. So he gave his preliminary [remarks], just for a few minutes and that was indeed wonderful. Then his formal lecture was later in that [parliament]. The parliament lasted for about one month, [with] all the sittings. And, he had spoken to that gathering several times, seven or eight times. And he was received very well. He became a hero.

He became famous overnight. They say that the next morning in all newspapers, his picture was published – the Hindu monk. Like this. And he was very famous just in one month. And after the parliament was over, there... he had no... in the beginning he had no intention to stay in this country, but then invitations became to arrive. Must stay. Must stay. There is something very new and strong which we have never heard these messages – the idea of divinity, the idea of freedom, the idea of strength, the idea of toleration. These things are very new to us, and very appealing to us. You stay. And so he stayed in different houses and he lectured in many places. He had gone even to the south, and around Chicago, in New York. He stayed and lectured. Later on, he started the first Vedanta Society of... in this country... the Vedanta Society of New York in eighteen ninety-five. Then he went to Europe also. He stayed there for some months, [then] again came to this country and again he went to Europe, and went to India, went back to India in eighteen ninety-seven. But again he

came back to... to this country in nineteen hundred and stayed for nineteen one, I think, and nineteen hundred, and stayed.¹ He came to the west coast. On that trip he founded the Vedanta... just the inception of our what is today the Vedanta Society in San Francisco. So that was started with... when he was present in 1900. So altogether he was in the West for about five years. He died at the age of forty and so one-eighth of the total span of his short life, he spent in the West, just giving these great ideas, ancient ideas of the spiritual nature of the universe and spiritual nature of man particularly. That was his message.

He died in 1902 and that was very strange also. When he came to this country, he very much fell in love with the American ideal of freedom. He thought this American experiment was a great experiment for the whole world, for many years. He had written a poem addressed... titled To the Fourth of July, and he was a passionate lover of freedom. So it is very, it is a great coincidence that he chose to depart from this world on the fourth of July. His Master had given him, had told him that he will have perfect control to select the day of your departure. Nobody knew. He was more or less healthy. In the morning he talked with his brother disciples, inspected the monastery, held some classes for the young novitiates. In the evening he came, went to his room, meditated. And during that meditation, you see, he gave up his body. That was [the] fourth of July. Very strange.

He had written a big poem, a long poem on the Fourth of July. So that was Swami Vivekananda and if we... In those days there was no tape recorder. But fortunately there was an Englishman, a young man who was a stenographer and he took many shorthand notes of his talks and it was through him that we find his talks and lectures and speeches. They are now collected in eight volumes, the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. And later on, during the 1928-27, a great French thinker, a Nobel laureate, Mr. Romain Rolland, he was very much impressed by Vivekananda's thoughts and he wanted to write a biography, not merely of Vivekananda, but also of his guru, Ramakrishna, and he did that.

Originally those two books were published in French. Then they were translated in[to] English and many other languages also: Romain Rolland's biography on Ramakrishna and on Vivekananda. There, Romain Rolland remarks in his introduction that Vivekananda died in 1902 and I am this... Romain Rolland did not know English. His sister knew [English]. So he collected all the materials that came from India. He wrote and his sister read them, translated to him, and so it was a great task for this great thinker. So he completed his biography. So in his introduction he made this remark that "It is now 1927 and he died in 1902. Maybe these lectures he gave much earlier. And even after the span of this great interval when I am reading his lines, I feel a kind of electric shock in my body. There is so much power and truth in his words."

So Vivekananda, his... he had really very important universal messages for us, but his first message was, "Man." See? Because the ancient spiritual wisdom of India, says that man really is infinite spirit, even though encased in this frame of body of mind and ego. Really he is eternal flame. He is the eternal flame, the spirit; he is divine. And the more he can manifest his spiritual nature

and applies that wisdom, that discovery to his practical life, that knowledge can be applied to his practical life, in his family life, in his social life, in his national life, and even all over. In each phase of life this spiritual wisdom, the knowledge of man's divine nature can be applied. And if it can be applied successfully, then really there can be international understanding, peace, toleration. Through his lectures we find these ideas. It is not by a pact... mutual political pact... then friendship and harmony all over the world can be established. Man has to understand that really I am divine and all men are really divine. So if... the more this understanding comes, a natural love and understanding and friendship are bound to emerge. Not merely in his mind, but in his behavior, in his family, in his society. That was his thesis about man.

And about God, Vivekananda said, "There is so much fight[ing] about the Nature of God. This is meaningless, because those who speak and fight they have really not known what God is. That is why they fight. So let them first try to know God." See, religion is not theology. Religion is not dogma or creed. Religion is experience. Very emphatically in his lectures we find he uses more stronger language. He says, "Religion is a science. Can you fight with science; can you quarrel with science? Science tells us facts, whether you like it or not." Science says there are four chambers in your heart. If you say, "No, there cannot be four; there must be three, theology says, [the] Bible says." That is foolishness and that is what we are doing. So Swami Vivekananda said, religion must be brought to the level of science. At one level, religion is science, when religion is experience. A person who experiences, really experiences God, knows that in God there cannot be any division. God is the ultimate unity. He is the unifying factor of all the heterogeneous elements in nature. See?

So he emphasizes spiritual experience. Spiritual experience can be carried on in many ways. Each religion is a path. It can be carried on in the [path] through emotion, the religion of bhakti, as in Christianity or in some forms of Hinduism. Or religious experience can have also through the path of rational inquiry, which in India we call jnana yoga. There are many ways to contact God. And each way is valid. And... So let man be interested in spiritual experience. If man is interested in spiritual experience and is able to have God-experience in his life, then he would not quarrel. He would not fight. That would be a great factor; that would be a great progress in the history of religion.

Then [he talks] about this idea of harmony of religions. Vivekananda over and over emphasized in the mortal conflicts of the world, there must be harmony of religions. The world, every part of this world is no longer isolated. Science and technology has brought the different parts of this world together, see? And so there must be people, [who] must be able to understand other people: other people's culture, other people's food, other people's education, other people's religion. So international understanding in the field of religion is important. And on this subject he has said many things, many important things.

So when we read Vivekananda's lectures and teachings, even in nineteen eighty-one, we find they are not obsolete. On the other hand, they are great pointers, valuable pointers. Vivekananda foretold... He had traveled also widely in Europe. In Europe, in those days there was already political tension among

these different countries. And Vivekananda foretold: if these nations do not change their attitude, if they, seeing the difference, if they go on, see with the political tensions and all, there will be war. There will be war and there will be devastation all around.

Man has to understand spiritual values. Man has made great material improvement in the nineteenth century, coming to the twentieth century, no doubt. But material improvement, progress alone does not give the security to man. Man really is not all material. The material part of man is true: his body, his flesh, his biological processes follow, of course... follow the laws of chemistry and physics and biology. But in the deepest core of man, there is the spirit. It is that part of man, that core of man is not material. And if man ignores that part, then man is in danger; man is in trouble. So man must appreciate spiritual values. Let him make material progress, but let him not forget his spirit. Because it is the spirit, it is his soul that will bring him real freedom and happiness and love and compassion and understanding. So he emphasized the re-education of man, rethinking of man. So in his writings and his speeches we find even now, great clues or rather a great light in order to make our culture and life, safe and meaningful.

So really speaking Vivekananda was a prophet. Who is a prophet? A prophet is not really a religious teacher, or a saint. A prophet is he, who understands human problems – not merely his own religious problems—but he understands the problem of man. And, he tries to help man through his knowledge. He gives some warnings to man. So in Vivekananda's writings we find several such warnings: warnings to the political leaders, warning to the scientists, warning to the wealthy man, and also there are several warnings to Christians. He said, "Christianity, Christ, I adore Christ. If it had been possible for me, I would worship Christ with the blood of my heart... but Christ's teachings very few people follow." See? Christ's teachings have been overshadowed by many dogmas. He uses this word, "churchianity." "Christianity has been overshadowed by 'churchianity' and that is why in the name of religion there have been so much exploitation, so much intolerance, so much bloodshed, all in the name of religion. That is a very sorry state of things. Religion which is supposed to bring peace and harmony and love to our life, if religion is exploited, and as a result of that wars come, then that is a very lamentable thing."

I will like to read you just two passages, and later on, I have requested Mr. Reed to read to you some selected passages about Swami Vivekananda's saying on the dignity of man. I will read to you just two passages about... this is a... this passage is in his great Chicago lecture, the lecture he gave in the Parliament of Religions.

"Holiness, purity, and chastity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world. Every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not fight. Assimilation and not destruction. Harmony and peace and not dissension.'"

I would like... Vivekananda as I mentioned, he was really a prophet for man, because experiencing himself the glory of the spirit, the soul in man, he cannot really see man suffer through his ignorance of his spiritual nature. So sometimes he uses very strong language about the future of man. He gives the impression that a time will come when man will really be able to discover his own spiritual truth. It is a question of discovery, as in science. Who could have dreamt, one hundred years ago, that man would be able to fly? See? Challenging gravity. Who could have dreamt? But that has come true. So in the field of science so many, so many wonderful things and happenings are coming.

So in the fruition of spiritual knowledge, as a science, Vivekananda had this dream: a time will come when **many** people will be able to discover his spiritual nature. He will have a body; he will have a mind; he will work; he will not run to mountains. He may be a scientist; he may be a clerk; he may be a woman; he may be a man. But just as now we see astronauts. Hmm? Astronauts, there, at one time we thought only men could be astronauts. But now Russia... Russian women astronauts are there and soon women astronauts will be here in this country. Who can prevent truth?

So, just as in many fields of science there is always exploration and discovery and men are living with that knowledge, so also [it is] in spiritual science. So Vivekananda had this dream and he expresses this dream—that a time will come when, in every city of this world, men and women will walk in the streets and these men and women are seers of truths. They will have Self-knowledge and, he said, they will be the real prophets. He said that a time will come when prophets will walk on all the streets of this world. May not be tomorrow. May not be [the] day after tomorrow. But a time will surely come when man will no longer ignore this great science, the science of his own Self. And with that self-knowledge he will function in life and make this world really a heaven. When there is no hate, there is no intolerance, there is not greed, then this world becomes a heaven. There is peaceful understanding among all people and they do not fight and quarrel and try to snatch others' property.

Here he says, "The man, a man who can understand his true nature, for him, his own Self becomes the highest God. When we worship God in temples, this and that, out of fear, out of superstition that is a sort of misery. That is due to lack of knowledge. Then when you understand the true nature of God, when you know that God, that infinite spiritual reality is your own Self, when you understand that then your worship becomes simple. You do not rush to temples anymore." So a very strong language, Vivekananda says about the future of religion. The future of man, the man who will be... who will realize the Self, about him, he says, "He dethrones all the gods that ever existed or even will exist in the universe and puts in their place the Self of man, the atman, higher than the sun and the moon, higher than the heavens, greater than the great universe itself. No books, no scriptures, no science can ever imagine the glory of the Self, which appears as man. The most glorious God that ever was, the only God that ever existed, exists and will exist. I am to worship therefore, now, but my Self."

I will then, this, I am tempted to read to you one sentence from one of his letters. This letter was written from India to one the devotees in Chicago, in fact,

the same house, which gave him shelter [the] first time. Her name was Miss Hale, Mary Hale. And she used to call him, "brother." So we find in his epistles, a collection of his letters, several letters written to this lady, young lady, and very important letters, giving his innermost feelings about these problems. So in one of these letters, he wrote, "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, the God who is in the poor, in the distressed, in the deprived, in the downtrodden."

I will now ask first before Mr. Reed reads some selected passages from Vivekananda, I would request our Swami Bhaktimananda[?] to read a poem which he has written in honor of Swami Vivekananda. [Poem and readings are not on the lecture tape.]

Our new bulletin, the bulletin for the month of February is out, and you will please take one at the door. The subject for next Sunday's lecture, February 1st, is "Divine Presence." We shall have our usual class on the Upanishads next Wednesday and also the Saturday class at 7:30 on the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

You will be seeing in this new bulletin that we shall have the annual general meeting of our Society on Saturday, February 21st. Though it is only for members, but it is our custom to invite anybody interested in our work, so I invite both members and nonmembers. If possible, please come that evening, Saturday this February 21st. That will be a program. Of course the business portion will be there, the reports, the secretary and the president's reports of the activities of the last year, election of the new director's board. But there will be plenty of spiritual discourses by visitors. Some visitors are... we hope will come from San Francisco who are old time friends and members and... So usually that is a very interesting function and finally it is sweetened by a nice refreshment. So those who are members, usually it is... our bylaws say that the members should receive a special notice of the meeting; so I shall be distributing that at the door to the members, and the rest, to the members we shall mail.

Om saha na va vatu; saha nau bhunaktu; saha viryam kara vavahai. Teja svi nav adhi tamastu ma vidvi shava hai. Om. Shanti, shanti, shanti.

May Brahman, the Truth Eternal, protect and nourish us, both the speaker and the listener. May we have the requisite strength and vigor for the pursuit of self-knowledge. May our study of the Vedanta be fruitful in the realization of Truth, and may we cherish no ill feeling toward anyone. Om. Peace. Peace. Peace be unto us all.

1. Second trip of Swami Vivekananda to America was from Monday, August 28, 1899 to July 26, 1900, according to: The Life of Swami Vivekananda by his Eastern and Western Disciples, v. 2, Mayavati, India: Advaita Ashrama, c. 1979. pages 482 and 535-6.