

THE FLAME OF SACRIFICE

Swami Vivekananda never had an opportunity to take rest. Every day of his life, without exception, he had to exert himself much more than we can imagine. It was not for him to enjoy leisure. Lethargy and weakness could never touch him. He was born with a mission, and he consciously pursued it from his early youth. As far as he could remember, he never slept for more than four hours since boyhood. He said, ‘Sometimes I worked at it twenty hours during the twenty-four; sometimes I slept only one hour in the night; sometimes I worked whole nights...’ (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 2, p.22*) He recalled the days of his preparation for future work, when he was asked in America to speak on his life and mission: ‘Never mind! We plunged into the breach. I believed, as I was living, that these ideas were going to rationalise India and bring better days to many lands and foreign races. With that belief, came the realisation that it is better that a few persons suffer than that such ideas should die out of the world. What if a mother or two brothers die? It is a sacrifice. Let it be done. No great thing can be done without sacrifice. The heart must be plucked out and the bleeding heart placed upon the altar. Then great things are done. Is there any other way? None have found it. I appeal to each one of you, to those who have accomplished any great thing. Oh, how much it has cost! What agony! What torture! What terrible suffering is behind every deed of success in every life!’ (*CW, Vol. 8, p.82*)

He called forth the best ones of future generations to the path of struggle, suffering, and sacrifice for others: ‘Plunge into the breach; fill up the breach with your body, your life. How should you allow the world to go down when you are living?’ (*CW, Vol. 8, p.179*) ‘Let us all work hard, my brethren; this is no time for sleep. On our work depends the coming of the India of the future.’ (*CW, Vol. 3, p.154*) ‘Work hard. Be holy and pure and the fire will come.’ (*CW, Vol. 5, p.38*)

Such struggle, suffering, and sacrifice for a lofty ideal are the legacy he left for those young men and women, who have the capacity to ‘sacrifice themselves to the earth, that the earth of the Superman may hereafter arrive’, to use the expressions of Friedrich Nietzsche (*Thus Spake Zarathustra, Part-I, ‘Zarathustra’s Prologue’*). For Swamiji, setting living examples to inspire others, not just talking, was the way to change the hearts and minds of the people. This is the *sadhana* and this is the *siddhi* too, he declared. He was the supreme commander of a great psychological warfare against all unmanliness and callousness, and he needed soldiers to lay down their lives. He expressed his scheme of work in a letter to his brother disciples: ‘Will such a day come when this life will go for the sake of other's good? The world is not a child's play — and great men are those who build highways for others with their heart's blood. This has been taking place through eternity, that one builds a bridge by laying down his own body and thousands of others cross the river through its help.’ (*CW, Vol. 6, p.273-274*) He laid down his own body and built the highways. And he invited humanity to the highways newly built: ‘From the worship of the dead past, O man, we invite you to the worship of the living present; from the regretful brooding over by-gones, we invite you to the activities of the present; from the waste of energy in retracing lost and demolished pathways, we call you back to broad new-laid highways lying very near. He that is wise, let him understand.’ (*CW, Vol. 6, p.186*)

The same idea he repeated in a letter to his disciple, Miss Margaret Elizabeth Nobel, ‘Sacrifice in the past has been the law. It will be, alas, for ages to come. Buddhas by the hundred are necessary with eternal love and pity.’ (*CW, Vol. 7, p.501*) He sacrificed himself completely and became a Buddha with eternal love and pity. Margaret Nobel followed him

and became Nivedita, the dedicated one. There were others too, and there *are* others at present as well. But, the world is too large and hence needs many more of such immense sacrifices. Swamiji wrote, 'A few young men have jumped in the breach, have sacrificed themselves. They are a few; we want a few thousands of such as they, and they will come.' (*CW, Vol. 6, p.281*)

It is in the ancient *Purusha-suktam*, which appears in the *Rigveda* (X.7.90.6) and in other *Vedas* also, that God or Purusha sacrificed Himself in the great *yajna* of creation which he pervades: '*Yatpurushena havishā devā yajnamatanvata*'. In pursuit of a new India and a new world civilization, Vivekananda the person sacrificed himself and Vivekananda the Voice pervaded the world.

Yet, Vivekananda considered it a grave mistake, a cause of our national degeneration, to thrust too high ideals down the throat of the common man, who is not fit for it. He loved him, understood his state of development, and was in complete sympathy with him. He advised gradual development for the majority. So comes such words from the icon of renunciation: 'There is no way shown how you may enjoy the world a little for a time; not only all openings to that are hermetically sealed to you, but, in addition, there are obstructions put at every step.' (*CW, Vol. 5, p.454*) 'He who cannot leap one foot, is going to jump across the ocean to Lanka in one bound!' he wondered. (*CW, Vol. 5, p.448*)

So, he did not like to burden all people with what they cannot bear. He said, 'No sooner a prophet feels miserable for the state of man than he sours his face, beats his breast, and calls upon everyone to drink tartaric acid, munch charcoal, sit upon a dung-heap covered with ashes, and speak only in groans and tears! – I find they all have been wanting. Yes, they have. If you are really ready to take the world's burden, take it by all means. But do not let us hear your groans and curses.' (*CW, Vol. 7, p.520-521*)

And Love personified as he was, he prayed to suffering mankind, 'Come ye that are heavy laden and lay all your burden on me, and then do whatever you like and be happy and forget that I ever existed.' (*CW, Vol. 7, p.521*)