

## What Swami Vivekananda Taught Us

Swami Vivekananda taught us to be youthful, clear-headed, and as strong – physically and mentally – as the thunderbolt, to shun superstitions and take recourse to bold reasoning. Many of our long cherished ideas may militate against the conclusions of reasoning. He wanted us to be brave enough to go ahead and accept the new, if it is the truth. ‘Face the terrible, face it boldly’, exhorted Swamiji. Do not fear society. Bold seekers of truth are not afraid of society. Most people in society do not have any great understanding of life and truth. That is why society is where it is. If it is to be elevated, it has to be given the light that it has not. There will be resistance. But, says Swamiji, do not compromise. Hold the ideal aloft and let it emanate light for all and for those very people who are against it.

‘Superstition is a great enemy of man,’ he said, ‘but bigotry is worse.’ Swamiji taught us to develop a modern, liberal, scientific outlook. He would welcome those who were atheists, but sincere. Not the insincere proponents of religions. Yet he reminded us of the limits of the intellect: ‘Everything in this life is so vast that the intellect is nothing in comparison with it. It refuses to be bound by the laws of the intellect!’ He also asked us to go beyond the confines of this or that religion and their theologies. He created for us an open space, with unlimited scope and infinite ways, for the growth of Manhood, which in its fullness expresses the idea called God.

‘We are the servants of that God who by the ignorant is called MAN’, thundered Vivekananda. Man comprises society. No society can change without changing its men. And man himself is the force behind all change. So, man was the centre of his attention. He stood against all useless and harmful divisions and privileges in society. He said, ‘My master used to say that these names, as Hindu, Christian, etc., stand as great bars to all brotherly feelings between man and man. We must try to break them down first. They have lost all their good powers and now only stand as baneful influences under whose black magic even the best of us behave like demons. Well, we will have to work hard and must succeed.’ He embraced everybody: ‘Everything must be sacrificed, if necessary, for that one sentiment, universality.’

He taught us that we are all essentially one. The more we feel this oneness within our heart, the more we become unselfish and live for others. He urged us: ‘Therefore, young men..., raise once more that mighty banner of *Advaita* (the bold proclamation of the oneness of all), for on no other ground can you have that wonderful love until you see that the same Lord is present everywhere. Unfurl that banner of love! “Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached.” ... If you want to help others, your little self must go.... Throw away everything, even your own salvation, and go and help others.... Give up this little life of yours. What matters it if you die of starvation – you and I and thousands like us – so long as this nation lives?’ A world citizen and a pioneer in international thinking, Vivekananda loved his distressed countrymen with all his heart. He called upon the youths of the country to build their lives and dedicate their life-energy for their uplift.

We normally take the surface value of such high ideals. He taught us to go deeper. Liberal and logical thinking can lead us to right conclusions, but do not alter our life to its core, do not save us from self-centric passions. Even right emotions are temporary, unless we make sufficient efforts to change our whole being. He said, ‘Religion is realisation; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes.’ Such

change alone was religion to him. Making such change in the core of our being is what he also called *character building*. ‘No one was ever more clearly aware that character was everything’, wrote Sister Nivedita about him. And she gave a wonderful synopsis of the practical implication of Swamiji’s teachings: ‘... in three words, Character is Spirituality.’

Swami Vivekananda did not discriminate between the spiritual and the worldly (or secular) on the basis of outward appearances. While discussing the crowning significance of her Master’s life, Sister Nivedita says: ‘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.... 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, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality.’

He lived his highest teachings in his own brief life. We are reminded of the picture of that wonderful life Netaji Subhas painted for us: ‘Reckless in his sacrifice, unceasing in his activity, boundless in his love, profound and versatile in his wisdom, exuberant in his emotions, merciless in his attacks but yet simple as a child — he was a rare personality in this world of ours.... Swamiji was a full-blooded masculine personality — and a fighter to the core of his being. He was consequently a worshipper of *Śakti* and gave a practical interpretation to the Vedanta for the uplift of his countrymen.... I can go on for hours and yet fail to do the slightest justice to that great man. He was so great, so profound, so complex. A yogi of the highest spiritual level in direct communion with the truth who had for the time being consecrated his whole life to the moral and spiritual uplift of his nation and of humanity, that is how I would describe him.’