

In his classic book *'Science and the Unseen World'*, Sir Arthur Eddington made a striking statement, 'Mind is the first and most direct thing in our experience; all else is remote inference.' The truth of Eddington's statement is felt in our quiet moments. How the 'remote inference' gets the status of immediate and only reality, and due to its tangibility manages to overwhelm our understanding, is the great enigma of human life. By quietness is meant not a mere hushed instant. Quietude comprises the great stilled moments of life, that yield the feel of timelessness; moments when even thought is an intrusion, an infringement in awareness, repelled by our whole being.

A moment stilled is a moment made available for deep scrutiny. When we arrest movement in thought, we halt time. Stillness generates heightened awareness and custody over space-time. When scrutinized, such moments reveal a hard fact: every moment of bliss has been a moment far from the prattle and racket of the ordinary mind. The best moments of life are the deeply quiet, yet fully conscious moments, which in hindsight throw perceptions, that otherwise elude our 'deepest' thinking. They are moments when even thought is drivel, talk is just so much noise. Knowledge at very deep levels is synonymous with deep quietude and deep quietude is tantamount to profound, inexpressible bliss.

This makes way for interesting observations—a renewed understanding of activity and inactivity and deeper insights into happiness. We live in a strange age, which has equated energy with

passion and drive, and dynamism with bustling around. However, the highest energies are released when the system is under complete control. Quietude is a state of harmoniously flowing life energy, where the fever of thinking has been adjourned. And this state reveals the actual dynamics of activity. The process of stilling is the actual conservation and controlled utilization of the entire energy of the system. Subtle transformative action is possible only through quietude. Such a system reveals the highest energy but zero entropy. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna's questions on karma meet their final answers in Krishna's description of the state of complete control—meditation. Paradoxical though it may seem, the greatest activity is complete self-control, bringing energies into complete synchrony. The rarefied state of stillness then, is the womb of activity. The deeper the stillness, the greater is the unfurling of high-level energy. Quietude thus helps us understand action in its true implications.

Quietude also helps us find a measure for happiness. A measure for happiness? The human mind has conditioned itself to work within quantifiable parameters. What we can quantify, we can assess; what we cannot quantify, we cannot comprehend. If we do not have the measuring tools, we consider our understanding to be vague and nebulous. Thus we measure, label and then evaluate. However, subjective experiences like happiness are beyond 'measurement'. This apparently makes them unknowable or beyond complete comprehension. If we had a measure for happiness, we could

understand and estimate joy better. We would give it exactitude and value. We would upgrade it when it would dip. But even as the greatest experiences of life evade the scale of relative parameters, so also does happiness. Until we enter the state of quietude. Deep quietude brings us a new parameter. Clarity of awareness—a state experienced in the pure depths of meditation, is something beyond the parametrical function of the ordinary mind, and can serve as a measure for happiness. The greater the clarity of objectless awareness, the deeper the bliss released. It is again a subjective experience which cannot be 'weighed', but can be felt.

Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi lived in the *Nahabat*, close to Sri Ramakrishna's room, in the wide precincts of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar. The area of the room is unimaginably small. The floor area of the room is less than fifty square feet. The distance between the walls across the floor is a mere 7 feet 9 inches. It was originally the music tower of the temple. Within that small space was Mother's private kitchen, where the Master's special diet was made. There were many things stored. The cooking vessels, dishes, and water jar were also kept in the room. A pot tied with a sling hung from the ceiling. It contained live fish, which would splash in the water all night. The same room served as a store-room, where groceries were stored, and it was sometimes the bedroom to three women devotees. There was very little privacy. And to top it all, there was no bathroom. Mother cooked for many—sometimes for even up to twenty people in this same kitchen. She slept on a hard mat under which she spread some burlap. It was a rigorous life of work. But it yielded the deepest moments of

contemplation. Mother's days were wrapped up in silence, deep contemplation, and service. She would get up at 3.00 in the morning and sit for meditation. Her mind would merge in God. She would cook and carry the Master's food to his room and witness his ecstasies with rapture. Her description of her state of mind then was, 'as if a pitcher of bliss was placed in the heart.' It overflowed and deluged the minds of those who stayed with her. They also carried the bliss with them.

A pitcher of bliss? Trained as we are only in 'measuring' quantities to estimate their value, we would naturally ask—how big was the pitcher or how much the bliss? Such was her bliss, that the memory of it was never remote in her mind. It pervaded her consciousness, and if we are careful to discern, even her countenance. It carried her through hard times. Even in later years, when she was old, she would reminisce, "What a unique person the Master was! How many minds he illuminated! What unceasing bliss he radiated! Day and night his room echoed and re-echoed with laughter, stories, talking, singing, and music. The Master sang, and I listened hour after hour, standing behind the screen of the *Nahabat*. What joyous days we passed through! People poured in day and night and there was no end to spiritual talk."

Spiritual joy is a realm that has inspired the highest level of detachment. Those who 'sense' it, readily give up everything for it. A reality shift is inevitable to them. This is because of the fact that *vrittis* undulate evenly in a calm mind and give steadiness to experience. Steadiness in experience gives the sense of reality. Thus a calm mind scintillates with consciousness and perpetual bliss. The

mind's endless modifications are giving us the experience of either a disordered, chaotic world or an orderly, beautiful world. A trained mind even in the most disturbing circumstances will maintain its calm, stability, and joy. An untrained mind, even in the best of circumstances, may yield to sorrow and depression. Thus 'experience', to a large extent, is of our own making. It is quite obvious then that to maximize the experiences we want to have, we need a positive mind with a calm disposition.

Who does not know the stillness of dawn that pulsates and inundates us with energy, the muteness of nature that teaches a thousand lessons, the bountifulness of a tranquil mind? In these times, the mind is sharply awake and vitally alive. The level of awareness is the actual measure of activity. Indeed, slowing the pace of thought makes life very interesting. A mental standstill, held in full awareness, is in fact the most intense moment. The best moments of life are the moments in 'slow motion', a fact actually exploited in movies. Vitality and serenity are essential features of happiness. A ringing vitality, greater awareness and tranquillity, go hand in hand, in a clear blissful state of mind. The onlooking, witnessing awareness, as it were, thickens. We stop getting 'carried away'. We stop identifying and just savour the moment. We can perforate ideas and study our habitual thought patterns. And see through our intentions!

The most exciting discovery of the state of quietude, however, is the fact of our own changelessness. Quietude brings us to the understanding that, the continuity of our awareness is an obvious fact. Awareness is always the 'ground reality'. It is so true, yet we never notice it. The

foreground of experience now becomes distinguishable from the background. Thoughts punctuate awareness and not vice-versa. Awareness supersedes thought in a quiet mind. And it is on the substratum of awareness that thoughts play. Perceptions and objects are distant details, quite beyond the horizon of this raised state of mind. Hence they disturb, they are painful.

An incident from Mother's life in Dakshineswar is instructive of this state. Mother's contemplative hours in the *Brahma muhurta* (pre-dawn hours) disclose subtle lessons for the meditative mind. She would sit usually on the veranda of the *Nahabat* or the roof. The place was surrounded by beautiful trees and flowering blooms. Towards the west lay the flowing, wide expanse of River Ganga. The moonlight would filter through the trees, stream through the pure air, and give an ethereal glow to the precincts of the *Nahabat*. The waters of the gurgling Ganga would reflect the silvery glow and beam it all around. The whole atmosphere would turn surreal. The exquisite stillness would enter into the heart and immobilize the mind. Nature invokes divinity in the rapt mind. Mother's naturally pure mind would verge on *Samadhi*. She would remain soaked in this state. One day Mother recollected, "While I was in meditation once, the maidservant Brinda shoved a brass plate in front of me with a bang. The sound hit me and penetrated as it were into my heart, and I cried out." Sound and object had lanced through the permeable frame of pure awareness.

The incident brings home an important point, that clearly proves the soaring stature of Mother's mental life. Despite her great efforts to hide her true

nature, her simple words reveal her longing and inner absorption, “When I was at Dakshineswar, I never went out of doors. I would stand for hours and, through the cracks in the matting, listen to the refrains of the *kirtanas*...Such singing and such trances there used to be!” Every incident of Mother’s life reveals the make and quality of her mind. Yogin Ma occasionally stayed with Mother in the *Nahabat*. One night when she was with Mother, they heard the wafts of the Ganga breeze carry the sonorous notes of a melodious flute. The plaintive delicacy of the sharp notes, struck Mother’s ears, and she became intensely alert. The great calm, the resonant melody, the glistening waters of the Ganga in the moonlight—all conspired to throw Mother’s mind into its true state. She plunged into ecstasy. Yogin Ma was stunned. She found Mother laughing off and on.

Mother’s normal awareness was by no means anything like the flickering, scattered, blinking everyday awareness that we know of. It was a focussed energy constantly on the verge of consummation. The explanations to her holy life of unceasing service, natural selflessness, great purity and perfection lie here. On the surface, Mother was entirely simple, every incident appears entirely uneventful. But when we still our minds, and peer deeper, we see something else. Every little incident of her life, is a magnificent testament of the highest awareness that the Vedanta struggles to express. The highest transcendental consciousness, meandering its way through a pure mind, percolating out as divine thought and ensuing forth its radiance in loving actions—this is perhaps the actual description of the one who came as Mother of all.

Every sensitive mind covets

quietude, for in the heart of quietude is enshrined divinity. If we truly wish to make sense of the world, we must begin by making sense of ourselves. Occasional bouts of quietude reveal the truth, that awareness is the true ‘I’, and *it is* independent of the turbulent mind. But the subsequent chatter of the mind makes us doubt again! An impression-ridden, emotion-driven, thought-dribbling mind—deflects attention and scatters awareness. And so continues this sporadic daze of human life-of finely woven reality with illusion, dream with waking, death with life! The pitcher of bliss within is never perceived.

Perceptions change when viewed from the vantage point of deep mental quietude. The whole universe, including our bodies and minds, drift in and out of our awareness, yet we are unable to distinguish between the primary and secondary reality! We are duped by our own attachments and identifications. For the awakened, the body and all that follows body-consciousness, that is, the world of objects, is actually an ‘abstraction’, for its presence is an intermittent awareness. Human life throws hundreds of clues at us, in order to help us perceive the primacy of spirit. If only we would quiet down and listen! A little more quiet, an occasional standstill, and the pitcher, which is within every one of us, is bound to jiggle and the bliss will naturally ooze out. Then perhaps, we will find ourselves praying in the touching words of Sadashiva Brahmendra, the eighteenth century mystic,

याचे नऽभिनवम् ते चन्द्रलोत्तंस किञ्चिदपिवस्तु
मह्यं प्रदेहि भगवान मदीयमेव स्वरूपमनन्दम् ॥

“O Lord Shiva! I am not asking for anything new from you. Give me back my own blissful state!” ❀

Nivedita and the Divine Feminine Power

PRAVRAJKA VIVEKAPRANA

Historical Background

I wonder if I can take you to the end of the 19th century because as I understand it, the advent of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita, the Ramakrishna Math, and the Sri Sarada Math, placed against the historical background of those times, was motivated by a universal Divine Power. The age has changed so drastically today that it is difficult to comprehend how these events could take place when they did and what was the power being manifested.

At the end of the 19th Century, the British Empire was the most powerful empire on this earth; they 'owned' or ruled over almost half the world; over millions of people. That was also the period when the general belief was that Europe had found a way of progressing continuously and to reach some 'heaven on earth' because of their great inventions, their industrial revolution, and the cheap labour of Asia and Africa. There was a feeling in the Western world that all their problems, or those of humanity the world over, were about to be solved, and this would happen without the intervention of God or any other Power or Truth. The World Wars had not occurred and nuclear energy had not yet been harnessed. The wars and nuclear bombs were later to shatter all such dreams. Till then, it was a period of great euphoria in the western world, especially in Europe. They believed that Asia and Africa were inhabited by subhuman

people, who could be exploited without any guilt. This was the very lopsided western vision of the world at that time.

If we go to the India of that time, the political movement for the freedom of India had not yet taken root, despite the 1857 uprising. The countries of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa did not seem to exist significantly on the map of this earth. There were millions of human beings who had been degraded to the point of losing their dignity and self-confidence. This was especially so for the women, because whenever a country is on the verge of losing its confidence or its ability to look after its culture, it is always the women who suffer the most. That is what had happened in India. I can't say we have come out of it completely even now, although the struggle for resurgence started with India's independence movement.

Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Sarada Devi were born in this India. That Sri Ramakrishna was born in this land proves that it was still spiritually alive at the time. Even if we don't think of him as a sage or an incarnation, we certainly know that, born in a remote village of Bengal, uneducated and utterly simple, he had deep understanding of not only the age in which he lived and its purpose but also the age which we are in now. He believed that the possibility, though hidden, in all human beings is so vast that they can and must finish their evolution, which started billions of years ago. He took twelve years to

complete his *sadhana* and demonstrated this truth for the world. What was the message? It was a simple message: that we are here to evolve. It is written in our most ancient books, the Vedas and the Upanishads—that man's purpose cannot be anything else but to travel and evolve, from wherever he may start, to reach the ultimate truth. What is this ultimate truth? We can call it God-realization, or Self-realization, or discovery of the Truth. It was meant to embrace the entire universe. Indeed a very vast ideal, which is very difficult to understand and accept emotionally. Intellectually, we can understand a little perhaps that if the universe has a God or a beginning it has to be impersonal; it cannot be personal. It isn't as if only human beings live on this earth. There are all kinds of creatures that exist and if there is a God of 'all', then he has to be present everywhere in the physical universe, even in an atom. This idea seems strange but it is not supernatural. What is nature? It is not merely the physical nature we perceive around us. It includes human nature, whether we manifest it as muscular power or nuclear power—it includes all manifested energy. Dynamism had a unique significance in Sri Ramakrishna's life. To be dynamic means to travel; to be aware that we are not here to stay. This is very difficult to accept, emotionally. We would like to build our homes in the middle of the traffic jam and live there! But Sri Ramakrishna wanted to give this message of personal evolution to humanity.

The Inspiration

Through the talks given by Swami Vivekananda in London in 1895 and 1896,

one British woman, Margaret Noble, later to become Sister Nivedita, felt inspired to come to India and dedicate herself to work for the cause of women and the people of the country. I find it very difficult to understand how she could do it because it was her country that was ruling over India. As I mentioned earlier, the Indian people were considered subhuman and worthy only of being enslaved; their religion was seen as full of hideous superstitions; the culture was thought of as useless; the language or languages were suppressed and replaced by the English language. The concept prevalent was that these 'heathen' Indians needed to be civilized, and the civilizing influence would come from the 'large-hearted' Englishmen! They had come to the conclusion that it was the duty of the Britishers to do this work. They were perhaps convinced that they had not 'invaded' India but had come with the idea of improving or civilizing her.

After the demise of Sri Ramakrishna in 1886, it was left to his disciples, especially Swami Vivekananda, to show to the people, especially to the West, that India was not a 'dead' country; she had a deep level of spirituality. This concept is perhaps difficult to understand, even today... because when you visit India you see poverty and degradation, or extreme inequality, enough to make you depressed or sceptical. To spread the message of Sri Ramakrishna and Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda travelled to America. Why did he need to do that? Sister Nivedita, Louise Burke (Sister Gargi), and many other disciples have explained how Swami Vivekananda tried to share the basic concept of personal evolution and the dynamism needed so that we do not lose the joy of human life. Swami Vivekananda

gave the message to the West and in the English language, which is widespread and common to many people. Sister Nivedita had later said, when she was convinced that the British Empire had no future, that the Empire was doomed, but maybe the language had a future!

After giving the message in the USA, Swami Vivekananda went to England where Margaret Noble first heard him in 1895. The English people should have been absolutely antagonistic to his message because they were the rulers of India. But somehow, they were ready to listen. Swamiji himself says, there was nothing that could compare to the hatred he felt because of what they had done to India and her people. But when he started interacting with them, he realized why they were so great. It was because they had the capacity to leave aside all dogmas and open their minds to new ideas and concepts.

When she first heard him, she felt there was nothing new in what he said. Then, as she herself admits, she thought it over and when he returned to London in 1896, and took classes again, trying to show that India had a message to give to humanity, it made a lot of sense. Every civilization has a message to give. If that message is eternal or permanent then that civilization survives, else it vanishes; like the ancient Babylonian and Mesopotamian, Egyptian — these civilizations are gone. Why is India still surviving? It has to give a spiritual message. There were many reform movements also popular at that time; and there were those focused specifically on the women. Whether this was for the women of the world or only the women of the subcontinent, I don't know, but I can say that I myself would

not be here, in the US, if Nivedita had not started the small school, now called Sister Nivedita School, in Kolkata, where young Indian girls were educated. That school became the nucleus for our organization, Sri Sarada Math and Ramakrishna Sarada Mission.

The Power of the Mother

If we believe that this new current comes from a very deep source, as Sri Ramakrishna believed, then there is the Mother of the universe, and She wants to rise today and wake us up. Why it is so, we do not know; but it does seem as if this power thinks of itself as feminine, as Swamiji says, and it wants to rise today. It is said that Sri Ramakrishna awakened, what is called in the Sanskrit language, the *kula-kundalini*, or the basic spiritual energy of the people, especially of women. Sri Ramakrishna worshipped this Divine Power as represented by the Goddess Kali, a very controversial image. One doesn't know how to accept her. She has a sword in one hand; she blesses with another hand; she holds a human head in the third hand; and with the fourth hand she grants fearlessness. She wears a garland of skulls. Her appearance can be threatening, if not frightening, to the human mind. I don't know whether the West can accept her, but I can see that western women are strongly attracted by this image. Are women attracted by the power she displays, or does she represent a new kind of aggression or assertion? She is totally feminine and yet powerful. The desire to stand out as individuals, to be counted as consequential and standing on their own, is very evident in this age, especially among women.

Sister Nivedita was perhaps the first western woman to recognize this power of Kali. She talked about Kali; she wrote a poem and a book about her. One day she asked Swami Vivekananda, is Kali the vision of Shiva? Shiva is another aspect of divinity, both destructive and auspicious. Again, there is the contradiction. India is a land of contradictions! There is a huge variety of languages, foods, faces, complexions, dresses, customs... India has been the melting pot of almost all the cultures, races and civilizations on this earth.

Recognizing this power, Sister Nivedita wanted to dedicate herself to awakening it in the women and people of India. This was the vision of both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. But why did she want to do this? We can say that she was the first one to understand what real feminism meant; that it was time that society accepted this feminine power and the need to nurture it once again. The societies of the world had become decadent everywhere. It was therefore time to recognize that a new kind of revolutionary movement was ready to start. This is happening today—it is not a revolution with weapons; it is a revolution because radical changes are taking place. Women are being challenged to take up roles where they need to stand on their own energy and power rather than depend on anyone else. And to a great extent, this is happening.

Relationship with the Holy Mother

As far as her relationship with the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi goes—we can say that Nivedita recognized the Mother for who she really was. This was

when the Mother was not even known as anyone significant to the public; she had not come to the fore as yet. How Nivedita recognized Mother is in itself a mystery, which to my mind is again connected to the Divine Power of Mother Kali. It is up to us whether we are ready to accept that there is a power, which is manifesting Herself. She first manifested herself as Sri Ramakrishna, and then as the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, and as Swami Vivekananda; and She is present everywhere today, here and now. The energy we think of as our private or personal is our mistake. Swamiji tried to tell us that we have no ‘private’ energy. Even the food we eat comes from the sun! But these facts are not part of our consciousness. We think the energy within our system is our own. It is not! That energy is present everywhere. I think Nivedita was able to recognize this. She accepted the Divine Mother, and then knew the Holy Mother to be the manifestation of that power, as basic womanhood and motherhood.

What is basic motherhood? The power of nurturing — whether we nurture our children, a society, a civilization, or a system of psychology or philosophy, it comes to the same — that it is about time that women identify themselves with the most basic idea of nurturing a civilization. This is the need of the Age. Women need to realize their own role if the dynamism of evolution has to be kept alive. Either we recognize it and give our life to it; if we do not then we become selfish and live within the circle of ‘I’ and ‘mine’.

Inspiration for the Youth

Sister Nivedita came to India in

1898, to dedicate herself to the education of girls, as was the initial task that Swami Vivekananda had perceived for her. In 1899 she travelled with Swami Vivekananda to the West, first to the US, and then she went back to England. When she returned in 1902, she felt that India was not only in need of a woman to educate the girls, but that the country also needed a feminine power to rouse the youth of India; to realize that there was something great within themselves that they first needed to acknowledge and then fight or struggle for it. If you read her book, *The Master as I saw Him*, she doesn't only talk of the girls but she also talks of the women of India. She found them highly educated. This was not in the sense of literacy in the English language, but that they knew their epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*; they knew a little of Sanskrit; in South India the language was never rejected; the women continue to chant Sanskrit hymns very beautifully, even today. In North India, because it was always exposed to invasions, the language vanished. Nivedita asserted at that time, that Indian women were not uneducated. This was a question that Swamiji had to face repeatedly in the West—why are Indian women so backward? He was even asked, why are the girl children thrown to crocodiles? Once he was asked, is it true that babies are thrown to crocodiles? He answered, yes they are, I was also thrown but because I was too fat, the crocodile did not eat me! Obviously the question was too ridiculous to be taken seriously!



Nivedita wanted to inspire the youth of India, just as her Guru, Swami Vivekananda, had inspired her. She wanted to convey the basic message of spirituality and nation building to the youth. But one cannot reach the depth if the other levels have not been resurrected. And the youth of India needed to be inspired at all the levels—political, economic, social, and cultural. She identified with each and every custom, and even the smallest superstition! She did that because she had to appeal to all levels of the Indian population—not just the intellectual or highly educated. She had to give the message to everyone. People wonder, even today, how she could have been converted to such an extent that she identified herself with the least appreciative aspects of Indian life, which Indians themselves are rejecting as superstitions!

What exactly is a superstition? A custom or belief of one time or era becomes the superstition of another time or era. But that only means that we think we are new on this earth, that we are modern, and that we belong to this modern age! In what way are we 'modern'? Carl Jung says, if we can walk step-in-step with the latest discovery, even with science, leave aside psychology or philosophy, then alone are we modern. Just using modern gadgets does not make us modern. Do we understand the principles? And what do these principles try to teach us? Can we apply those laws in our daily lives? If we are not even aware of them, how are we modern?

To take a long jump forward we need to move back first, to gather momentum. Therefore to understand, we need to go to the time when the past customs were not considered superstitions. Then we take the energy out of them and bring them into our present lives. Unless we can do that we do not have the dynamics to take all that comes in our way in this day and age. If we just try to shut away the past and refuse to connect with it, we are lost in the present and that is causing the diseases of anxiety, depression, and stress today. Unless we can take the energy out of those buried impressions, that carry so much power, we are not strong enough.

Many of these levels have been rejected, so why did Nivedita take them up? The answer comes from Sri Ramakrishna himself. He attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi, which is completely non-dual or impersonal, and he came down to the level of duality and accepted all the customs, traditions, even the superstitions! Today, we know, the tendency is to move away from the past because we think that most of the traditions and customs are superstitions! We think we can ignore the past and jump into the future, but that is not at all possible unless we move back to prepare to take the jump... just as a high jump or a long jump athlete has to do!

Sister Nivedita did that by travelling all over India, showing or proving to the people that they were great. Why did she choose to do that? One can say it was because of the motivation and inspiration given to her by Swami Vivekananda. But all these are mysterious happenings, at the deepest level. They are not easily understood. Either we accept, as Sri Ramakrishna said, that there is the Mother

of the universe who wants it conveyed or accepted that we are here to evolve, or we will never understand how these events take place. The other levels as I mentioned are meant to lead us to that ultimate dynamism, whereby we can transcend human limitations and become aware of our own divinity. This was the message that had to be given and this is what Nivedita tried to do.

Swami Vivekananda went away very early, and he gave what he had to give in that short span of time. He gave it in the West and it is thanks to the western people, who recorded his words, that we have his most valuable message available to us to share, to talk about, and to discuss. I know that Vedanta does not have mass-appeal because it has no paraphernalia; it has nothing attractive to offer. It doesn't have too much colour or ritual attached to it. It should be popular in today's day and age, given that human beings are skeptical about rituals. This psychology is based on intellectual understanding and emotional acceptance. While the former might be possible for some, the latter is a far cry! Very few people come to Vedanta Centres because Vedanta does not appeal to the sense level! There is no appeal for the surface of the mind. There is a deep message and it gives ultimate enjoyment; but to enjoy Advaita Vedanta—which seems stark, abstract, and difficult, one has to transcend a few lower levels.

Swamiji gave this message to Nivedita, and she tried to give it to the people, which meant giving all her energy to India. She became identified with India to an extent and in a manner, that we, who are born and brought up in India cannot do. That in itself is a superhuman attempt that she made, either for the sake of this

dynamic message, or for the sake of her devotion to Swami Vivekananda, or because she really understood that it was the need of the time. She gave her all to India; her ashes are buried in Darjeeling, in the foothills of the Himalayas. I don't know if most Indians are even aware of her gift to India.

The Message for This Age

Modern people are rejecting everything today, believing that wherever there is prosperity or money, that is the sign of a modern civilization, and that needs to be imitated. This is a universal phenomenon. It takes time to appreciate and understand the intrinsic value of a culture or civilization ... even to appreciate political freedom!

The manifestation of the power of Kali, as seen in Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda did not die with them, or with Sister Nivedita and the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. It is an 'unfolding' taking place today, within space and time, as that is the way culture functions, that is the way that ideas travel. That is how they are expressed. There was a very significant and dynamic beginning ... now slowly it will cover many lands.

The Nivedita School was started on the day of Kali Puja. This is the key to everything—the rising of the Universal Feminine Power. And why does it want new revolutionary movements involving feminine energy to manifest itself or surface? This mystery is not easy to unravel. Of course, Sister Nivedita started the school; and yes, she had tremendous

support of the Holy Mother. Go a little deeper, we know that the initial impetus came from Swamiji; go further and we know Sri Ramakrishna wanted it; but if we go still deeper we come to Mother Kali. She is the invisible mystery, but she is also visible everywhere. It is up to us to recognize this. The energy that is manifesting today in the world is nothing but the desire to separate us as individuals. Everyone is suddenly aware that we are not merely members of a group and family, but there is something independently individual... and that is what She is. Dynamism is the only way out. What becomes dynamic? The mind can remain dynamic, as that is what takes rebirth and that is the journey of the mind not the body.

Can we find a spiritual significance in what Sister Nivedita did, given that on the surface it looks like social reforms—education of young girls, preventing child marriage, etc., which was the reformative movement of that age? The ultimate message was definitely given in the educational system of that time, no doubt. But the beginning had to be made through social reforms—like discouraging child marriage and encouraging girls to go to school, or addressing the problems as perceived in that age. But I don't think the problems that existed then have vanished even today. In fact they are more aggravated! If we wish to understand this age, then the same problems of the yester-years are worse today. Therefore, the message and dedication of Sister Nivedita continues to be most relevant. We need to recognize this and pay homage to her sacrifice. ❀



Divinity of Man and Positive Psychology

—SWAMI NITYASTHANANDA

From time immemorial two basic questions are being asked—one is, what is this universe, and the other, who is this man. Many thinkers, philosophers, scientists, saints and mystics answered these questions variously on the basis of their introspection and experiences. We find in the Upanisads these questions explicitly stated. For example, the *Svetasvatara Upanisad* starts with the following verse:

किं कारणं ब्रह्म कुतः स्म जाता जीवाम केन
क्व च संप्रतिष्ठाः ।
अधिष्ठिताः केन सुखेतरेषु वर्तामहे ब्रह्मविदो
अवस्थाम् ॥ (इवे.उ.१.१)

‘Enquirers of ultimate Truth ask these questions: is Brahma the cause of the world? Whence have we come? For what purpose are we living? Where are we established? Who is making us undergo happiness and misery?’

Here we are mainly concerned with subjective enquiry, and Swami Vivekananda’s concept of man.

Our True Identity

If we ask some person who he is or what is his identity, he might mention his name. But this is only a provisional sound symbol attributed to him by others, not his real identity; and there might be others with the same name. Or suppose that person answers by telling his designation, even that represents only the position he holds, and not what he really is. Or if he gives his family identity, then also he is telling about his relationship with

somebody else, and not about himself. Whatever adjectives or special traits he may mention to identify himself, they do not really represent him; he only shares them with others of similar nature. If he says that he is the body, the mind or the self, we may perhaps take him to be out of his mind! Whatever appellation he may give as his identity, it is not possible to zero in on something to give his real identity. He will give his identity differently according to the situation, which serves his practical purpose for the time being.

Nevertheless, we all feel that we have a self-identity. What is it that gives this sense of self-identity however vague it may be? According to Swami Vivekananda, it is the Divine Consciousness. As the centre of personality, this Consciousness gives wholeness or integrity to the personality, depending upon its manifestation, which varies from person to person according to one’s spiritual growth.

Though this idea of the divinity of man is embedded in the Upanisads, the credit goes to Swami Vivekananda for highlighting it and giving it a powerful expression through his speeches and writings, making this his mission in life. As a result, it revolutionized the whole thought current of the world, changing the very concept of man altogether. Earlier conceptions of man as a born sinner, naked ape, etc. are changing into nobler conceptions of man. The reductionistic psychology is being replaced by positive

psychology. The potential divinity of man, the innate goodness, the power of positive thinking, faith in oneself, inner strength, fearlessness, self-esteem—these ideas cover the pages of present-day books related to human emancipation. It is as though Swami Vivekananda himself is speaking through these present-day authors. For example you read the following statement of Orison Swett Marden in his book, *Every Man A King*, “When a man realizes that he is divine, when he sees that he is a part of the everlasting principle, which is the very essence of reality, nothing can throw him off his physical or mental balance. He is centred in the everlasting truth, entrenched there in infinite Power from the taint of fear or anxiety or worry, or accident, because he is conscious that he is principle himself, a part of the eternal verity.”¹ The very title of the book is suggestive and reminds one of Swami Vivekananda’s memorable advice, ‘Be a king with all your humility.’

Great Transformation

The following passage will vouch for the great transformation of religious outlook that is taking place in America:

“For decades, advocates have communicated Vedantic ideas, sometimes to persuade, sometimes to explain, and sometimes with no agenda or reference to anything Indian. As a result, millions of Americans have been influenced by Vedanta-Yoga without necessarily being aware of it, just as they devour pasta without knowing its origin in China or watch television without having heard of its inventor, Philo. T. Farnsworth. When asked about their religious or spiritual

attitudes, a great many people sound vaguely Vedantic, and if you ask where they got those ideas, they don’t always know, or they mention a book, a teacher, a friend or family member, pastor, health practitioner, celebrity, or a self-help author. The influencer might not have used religious language at all but rather that of scholarship, science, or therapy; perhaps they used the generic religiously neutral argot that has evolved in response to pluralism—a spiritual Esperanto, so to speak. With few exceptions, however, one can trace the line of influence to something Eastern.”²

It is no doubt true that the great thinkers of transcendentalism like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, were responsible for introducing Vedantic ideas in America; still it cannot be overestimated that it was Swami Vivekananda’s debut into the world of thought and his powerful speeches backed by his overwhelming spiritual personality that made an indelible impact on the western mind which catalyzed the process of transformation.

We can trace the progressive transformation of western psychology from the very crude and low image of the human to the noblest concept eloquently underscored by Swami Vivekananda. We find Sigmund Freud and his followers stating that repression of lower impulses is the cause of neurosis. Later, Alfred Adler pointed out that it is the repression of the will to attain power that is the root cause of neurosis. Further, we find humanistic psychologists like Erich Fromm and others demonstrating that the main cause of neurosis is the repression of hidden talents and capacities. Still further we come across Victor E. Frankl affirming that the repression of the ‘will to meaning’ is at

the root of all psychological problems. Finally, we come to Ken Wilber, who says, "It is unfortunate that we in the West, over the past few centuries, have increasingly tended to repress the Transcendent. This repression extensive as it is subtle, is undoubtedly more responsible for the discontentment of our present unhappy civilization than any amount of repression of sexuality, hostility, aggression or other superficial repressions operating on the upper levels of spectrum."³

It is obvious to all those who are acquainted with Swami Vivekananda's works that the manifestation of divinity will be followed by the awakening of all the noble qualities in man and the power to face the existential problems of life, and it is the panacea to all mental maladies.

Positive Psychology

The emerging positive psychology, which emphasizes the positive side of human personality is complementary to traditional psychology, which is obsessed with the negative side of human personality. Traditional psychologists, especially Freudians, mainly studied mentally sick patients and tried to search for the reasons for disease in the unconscious depths of personality, which is conceived by them mainly to consist of instinctive drives. The over-emphasis of the pleasure principle reduced man to a highly sophisticated machine acted upon by animal instincts. As Jacob Needleman

puts it, "Freudianism institutionalized underestimation of human possibility." Substantiating this statement, Abraham Maslow says, "It is as if Freud supplied the sick half of psychology, and we must now fill it out with the healthy half. Perhaps the healthy psychology will give us more possibility of controlling and improving our lives and for making ourselves better people."

Positive psychology pins its attention on the innate goodness of man and tries to cure mental problems by appealing to noble qualities in him, which are also an inalienable part of his personality. "Positive psychology focuses on positive emotions, positive engagement, positive relationships, positive meaning, and positive accomplishment in pursuit of happiness. Its focus is not on dysfunction and illness of individuals but on helping them to become happier and more fulfilled.

In the words of Christopher Peterson (2006), Positive Psychology 'is the scientific psychology of what makes life most worth living. It is a call for psychological science and practice to be as concerned with strength as with weakness; as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst; as concerned with making the life of normal people fulfilling as with healing pathology.' In short, positive psychology seeks to make people happy by making life meaningful."⁴

The object of positive psychology is to help the individual to develop positive attitudes like courage, self-confidence,



Martin Seligman

optimism, etc. and to lead a meaningful life, with an ideal in life. Martin E. P. Seligman, the pioneer of positive psychology, points out three dimensions of positive life:

“For the **pleasant life**, you aim to have as much positive emotion as possible and learn the skills to amplify positive emotions. For the **engaged life**, you identify your highest strengths and talents and recraft your life to use them as much as you can in work, love, friendship, parenting, and leisure. For the **meaningful life**, you use your highest strengths and talents to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than self.”⁵

Swami Vivekananda is All Positive

If we look at Swami Vivekananda’s teachings with this background of Positive Psychology, it becomes clear to anyone that Swami Vivekananda was a positive psychologist of the highest order, and one can appreciate Rabindranath Tagore’s observation that in Swami Vivekananda “everything is positive and nothing negative.”

Here are some of the important positive thoughts of Swami Vivekananda:

1. Man is potentially divine, he is not a sinner.
2. Man is not travelling from error to truth, but from lower truth to higher one.
3. The history of evolution is progressive reading of spirit into matter.
4. There is hope for every man, however degraded he may be, to reach the highest.
5. All power, knowledge, goodness perfection, love and everything noble are within man.
6. All are travelling towards liberation. One who stumbles more is wicked and the one who stumbles less is good.

7. No use cursing darkness, instead bring the light.

8. Faith in oneself and developing a positive self-image is the panacea for all ills.

9. Liberty is the first condition for growth.

10. Self-hatred is the first step to degradation.

11. Be cheerful, not gloomy, whatever may be the situation.

12. You are responsible for whatever you are. Man is the maker of his own destiny.

13. Knowledge is the goal of life, not happiness.

14. Religion is all-inclusive. It is inclusive of all knowledge, and all human aspiration.

15. Love and co-operation are the basis of evolution, not war and competition.

16. They alone live who live for others.

17. The world is the great gymnasium where we come to make ourselves strong.

18. If a man with an ideal makes a thousand mistakes, a man without an ideal would make ten thousand.

19. Expansion is life, contraction is death.

Now we shall consider some of the positive human qualities highlighted by positive psychology for happy, useful and meaningful living of man, and see how they find prominent place in Swami Vivekananda’s teachings.

Culture Counts

A comprehensive definition of culture is given by E.B. Tylor: “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Man not only absorbs the culture of the society, but he also contributes culture—positive or negative—to society, by manifesting his own potentialities. That is why Swami

Vivekananda says, “The struggle to objectify the subject is the one phenomenon in the world of which all societies and social forms are various modes and stages.” In this sense man is both creator and creature of society. When we look at it from this standpoint, we can very well understand the importance of culture in the mental health of man, which affects both the individual and society.

That is why David Satcher says, “Culture and society play pivotal roles in mental health, mental illness and mental health services. Understanding the wide-ranging roles of culture and society enables the mental health field to design and deliver the services that are more responsive to the needs of racial and ethnic minorities.”⁶ Psychologists have to take account of the effect of culture in treating educational and psychological problems, and so they need to incorporate cultural issues in dealing with these problems.

Now when we turn to Swami Vivekananda, we find him asserting the importance of imparting culture along with knowledge in the educational system. He insisted that in India, education must be rooted in our own national and cultural ideologies. He attributed the degeneration of Buddhism to the lack of culture due to the neglect of Sanskrit, which according to him, carries with it dignity and culture. According to him, it is the culture that withstands shocks, not a mass of knowledge; “Knowledge is only skin deep, scratch a little and the devil will come out...Excess of knowledge and power without holiness, makes one a demon.”

The Message of Strength

In positive psychology strength is

defined “as a capacity for feeling, thinking and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes.”⁷

This reminds us of the following passage of Swami Vivekananda: “What we want is to see the man who is harmoniously developed...great in heart, greater in mind, great in deed.... We want the man whose heart feels intensely the miseries and sorrows of the world.... And we want the man who not only can feel but can find the meaning of things, who delves deeply into the heart of nature and understanding. We want the man who will not even stop there, but who wants to work out the feeling and meaning by actual deeds. Such a combination of head, heart and hand is what we want.”⁸

Swami Vivekananda’s message of strength is applicable to every stage of life. In the present context, we are exposed to different kinds of negative influences through various ways. Unless one is able to stand very firmly on one’s own personal ground, there is every possibility of being swept away by the current of these influences. Unless one is prepared to stand alone, one would be like a mirror reflecting other’s influences and personalities. We need strength to stand alone psychologically, without desperately hankering for love, sympathy and appreciation from others.

That is why Swami Vivekananda says with great emphasis that weakness is the root cause of all evils. If we commit some mistake, being unable to face the consequences of it, we try to hide it with falsehood. Without the boldness of holding on to moral integrity, we try to conform to the situations presented by a corrupt society. Being overpowered by unbridled

passions, man tries to fulfill his desires even by deception. Being incapable of bearing the hunger of ego, man hankers for name, fame, power, position, etc. Helplessly driven by negative emotions, man sometimes talks and behaves insolently thereby undermining human relationship.

Positive Emotions

According to Positive Psychology, “Positive emotions (e.g. excitement and glee) lead to cognitive flexibility and creativity, whereas negative emotions (e.g. fear and anxiety) are linked to a fleeting response and termination of activities.”⁹ Among Positive emotions the most emphasized one in Positive Psychology is ‘happiness’.

Normally it is conceived that happiness is the result of satisfaction of desires. But this kind of happiness is fleeting and conditioned. And many of our desires remain unfulfilled that lead to frustration, which is so painful that it even eclipses the happiness of fulfilled desires. Real happiness is contentment, not fulfilment of desires. It is said, “Happiness must ensue, it cannot be pursued.” Real happiness consists in a sense of fulfilment which is the result of productive activity. In fact, happiness is the result of self-expression, expression of potentialities within, such as capacities and talents, love and charity, goodness and ultimately divinity. According to Swami Vivekananda, dead matter cannot give us happiness, consciousness alone makes us

happy. That is why, good and loving human relationships lead to health and happiness in spite of material poverty. Therefore Swamiji gave the highest place to love among the positive emotions, and declared that love never brings unhappiness. Love is not a means of filling the inner emptiness, but an expression of inner abundance. It is an inner growth in which the consciousness, confined to the limits of human personality, progressively expands to encompass in its fold family, society, humanity and ultimately the entire universe. This is the meaning of Swamiji’s declaration, ‘Expansion is life and contraction is death.’

Empathy

Empathy is defined as “an emotional response to the perceived plight of another person.

Empathy may entail the ability to experience emotions similar to the other person’s or a sense of tenderheartedness towards that person.”¹⁰

Another noble quality related to love, which rather affirms love, is empathy—the capacity to place oneself in the position of others and share their happiness and misery. Everybody possesses this capacity to a greater or lesser degree. When we see others laughing happily, we also tend to share it. Misery also evokes a similar response in others. According to neuroscientists, the human brain itself is endowed with this capacity. There are certain nerve cells called mirror neurons, which are



Happiness

responsible for this empathetic response. For healthy human relationships to prevail in society, it is an absolute necessity to learn to participate in the happiness of others and partake of their misery.

Nowadays, the concept of empathy is becoming quite popular, the word being used by people of different walks of life. Roman Krznaric, in a recent article in *Reader's Digest*, says, "The old view that we are essentially self-interested creatures is being nudged firmly to one side by evidence that we are also *Homo empathicus*, wired for empathy, social cooperation, and mutual aid. Over the last decade, neuroscientists have discovered that 98 Percent of us have the ability to empathise."¹¹ He further says in the article, "The 20th century was the Age of Introspection, when self-help and therapy culture encouraged us to believe that the best way to understand who we are and how to live was to look inside ourselves. But it left us gazing at our own navels. The 21st century should become the Age of Empathy, when we discover ourselves not simply through self-reflection, but by becoming interested in the lives of others. We need empathy to create a new kind of revolution. Not an old-fashioned revolution built on new laws, institutions, or policies, but a radical revolution in human relationships." Here the interesting thing that strikes our mind is that the idea of Age of Introspection comes close to Swamiji's concept of *Atmano mokshartham*, which means, for one's own salvation, and that of the Age of Empathy can be equated to his concept of *Jagaddhitaya cha*, which means, and for the good of the world.

Psychologists identify three kinds of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional

empathy, and empathetic concern. "While cognitive or emotional empathy means we recognize what another person thinks and resonate with his feelings, it does not necessarily lead to sympathy, or concern for another's welfare. The third variety, empathetic concern, goes further: leading us to care about them, mobilizing us to help if need be."¹² Emotional empathy refers to 'do you feel for others?' Cognitive empathy refers to 'do you understand their condition and their actual need?' Empathetic concern is concerned with 'what you can do to help them face all the challenges?' Swami Vivekananda's following statement epitomises all these ideas in inspiring words:

"...Three things are necessary for great achievements. First, feel from the heart...Do you feel? Do you feel that millions and millions of the descendants of gods and of sages have become next-door neighbours to brutes? Do you feel that millions are starving today, and millions have been starving for ages?...

"You may feel, then; but instead of spending your energies in frothy talk, have you found any way out, any practical solution, some help instead of condemnation, some sweet words to soothe their miseries, to bring them out of this living death?

"Yet that is not all. Have you got the will to surmount mountain-high obstructions? If the whole world stands against you sword in hand, would you still dare to do what you think is right?"¹³

Altruism

This is another important virtue highlighted in *Positive Psychology*. Altruism is others-centred action and

behaviour aimed at benefiting another person. It is the opposite of ego-centric behaviour and action. Even morality is classified into egoistic and altruistic. 'I want to be moral' –this is the dominant note of egoistic morality. The person of this type will stick to truthfulness even at the cost of hurting or undermining the good of others. Perhaps, the *Mahabharata* tragedy is partly due to the Pandavas' inaction on the plea of holding on to *dharma* at the cost of Draupadi's humiliation in the royal court. Here one is reminded of Sri Krishna's following statement in the *Mahabharata*:

यद् भूतहितमत्यन्तं तद्धि सत्यं प्रकीर्तितम् ।

“That is truthfulness which accrues the highest good of beings.”

This altruism is central to the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. According to him, unselfishness and self-abnegation is the basis of morality. He claims that one cannot achieve one's own good, without at the same time, promoting the good of others for, “The individual's

life is in the life of the whole; the individual's happiness is in the happiness of the whole; apart from the whole, the individual's existence is inconceivable—this is an eternal truth, the bed-rock on which the universe is built. To move slowly towards the infinite whole, bearing a constant feeling of intense sympathy and sameness with it, being happy with its happiness and being distressed in its affliction, is the individual's sole duty. Not only is it his duty, but in its transgression is his death, while compliance with this great truth leads to life immortal.”¹⁴

To conclude, according to Swami Vivekananda, man will be adorned by positive attitudes, positive feelings, and virtues as a result of the manifestation of potential divinity. To quote his inspiring words: “Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.”¹⁵ ❀

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