

A full-length portrait of Swami Vivekananda, wearing a traditional orange turban and a dark brown kurta with a matching shawl. He is standing with a neutral expression against a solid orange background.

Swami Vivekananda

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Introduction

Great scholar and saint, Swami Vivekananda (January 12, 1863-July 4, 1902), born Narendranath Dutta was the chief disciple of the 19th century mystic Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the founder of Ramakrishna Mission. He is considered a key figure in the introduction of Hindu philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga in Europe and America and is also credited with raising interfaith awareness, bringing Hinduism to the status of a world religion during the end of the 19th century. Vivekananda is considered to be a major force in the revival of Hinduism in modern India. He is perhaps best known for his inspiring speech beginning with “Sisters and Brothers of America”, through which he introduced Hinduism at the Parliament of the World’s Religions at Chicago in 1893. Swami Vivekananda was born in an aristocratic Bengali family of Calcutta in 1863. Swami’s parents influenced his thinking—the father by his rational mind and the mother by her religious temperament. From his childhood, he showed inclination towards spirituality and God realisation. While searching for a man who could directly demonstrate the reality of God, he came to Ramakrishna and became his disciple. As a guru, Ramakrishna taught him *Advaita Vedanta* (Hindu religious non-dualism) and that all religions are true, and service to man was the most effective worship of God. After the death of his Guru, Vivekananda became a wandering monk, touring the Indian

subcontinent and getting first-hand knowledge of India's condition. He later sailed to Chicago and represented India as a delegate in the 1893 Parliament of World Religions. An eloquent speaker, Vivekananda was invited to several forums in the United States and spoke at universities and clubs. He conducted hundreds of public and private lectures and classes, disseminating Vedanta and Yoga in America, England and a few other countries in Europe. He also established the Vedanta societies in America and England. Later he sailed back to India and in 1897 founded the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, a philanthropic and spiritual organisation.

Naren, as Swami Vivekananda was affectionately called white young, was born in a prominent family. From the very early days Naren give evidence of qualities which distinguished him later. He was always drawn to wandering sadhus and mendicants to whom he would give away everything he had. He was popular among his companions and was always their leader. He was also mischievous and naughty and his mother had no end of trouble in managing him. When he became unmanageable his mother used to put him under the tap and turn the water on and that seems always to have brought him round. He had many pets, among which were the family cow, birds and monkeys. He had a zest for sports. When he played, he played furiously without caring for any physical hurts. He was dauntless and free from superstitions. There was a gymnasium in which he and his friends learned 'fencing, wrestling, lathi and other sport he was also an excellent cook.

In addition to these attainments, he was very studious and always stood first in his class. After completing school, he joined the Presidency College and later the Scottish Missionary College. His Principal said of him: "I have travelled far and wide, but I have never yet come across a lad of his talents and abilities."

Naren was deeply spiritual and used to meditate for long periods. It is said that one day, when he was meditating with one of his friends, a snake crawled towards him. The other boy was frightened and ran away but Naren, immersed in meditation, was not even aware of the approach of the reptile.

The family had a cart driver who used to tell Naren stories from the puranas. The stories told of saints and sages and the greatness

and glory of a pure and chaste life. One day Naren heard the cart driver vehemently denouncing married life. This made a profound impression on young Naren, "If marriage is so bad what has a God to do with it?" said the surprised boy to himself. From that time he gave up his worship of Sita and Rama and took to the worship of Shiva, who is a symbol of tapasya.

As he read books on philosophy and his intellectual horizon expanded, he began to question orthodox beliefs. His mind wanted proofs of Divine existence. He went to Keshab Chandra Sen, the famous Brahma Samaj leader of his time, but was not satisfied. He went to Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and asked him whether he had seen God. The Maharshi was taken aback at the directness of the question. Though he could not satisfy Naren, he appreciated the deep spiritual earnestness of the boy. One day Dr. Hastie, his principal, was taking a class on Wordsworth and found it difficult to explain the ecstasy of the poet. He said that those who wanted ocular proof of spiritual ecstasy might go and see for themselves Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. That is how Naren first heard of Sri Ramakrishna, meeting whom was to change the entire course of his life.

The historic meeting of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda which took place in 1881 is one of the most exciting of service, based on knowledge, which he had received as a sacred legacy from his Master.

In August 1886, the Master passed away, leaving his disciples forlorn. It was Naren who dragged them out of their depression and inspired them to return to the Baranagore Ashrama, which became the beginning of the Sri Ramakrishna math and mission. It was here they performed the Vraja Homam and formally took vows of sannyas, of celibacy and poverty, and dedicated their lives to the realisation of God. After considerable tapasya, one by one they wanted to pursue the wandering life, according to the tradition of monks, begging their food and not staying anywhere.

During his wanderings in Alwar, the Swami had a very interesting discussion with Maharaja Mangal Singh. The Maharaja said, 'I have no faith in idol worship, I cannot worship wood, earth, stone or metal, like other people.' The Swami looked round and saw a picture of the Maharaja hanging on the wall. He asked

for it to be given to him. Holding it in his hand, Swami asked the Maharaja's courtiers. "'Whose picture is this?' One of them answered, 'it is the likeness of our Maharaja". A moment later, those present trembled with fear they heard the Swami commanding the courtier to spit on it. They cried out in fear and bewilderment "What! Swamiji! What are you asking us to do? This is the likeness of our Maharaja. How can we do such a thing?" But surely, said Swami, "the Maharaja is not present in this photograph. This is only a piece of paper. It does not contain his bones, flesh and blood; it does not speak or behave or move in any way as does the Maharaja. And yet all of you refuse to spit on it because you see in this photo the shadow of the Maharaja's formatting upon the photo, you feel that you will be insulting the master, the prince himself. Thus, It is with the devotees who worship stone and metal Images of gods and goddesses. It is because an image brings to minds their Ishta Devata (chosen deity), or some special form or attribute of divinity that people worship God in an image. They do not worship the stone or the metal as such. Everyone, O Maharaja, is worshipping the one God, who is the Supreme Spirit.'

The Swami wandered throughout the length and breadth of India, mostly on foot and saw for himself the condition of the country. For nearly fourteen years, he travelled from place to place many times, facing starvation, not knowing where he would get his next meal. Maagrelly clothed, he lived in places where the thermometer registered thirty degrees below zero. In some places he received a royal welcome from Princes and in some others he was treated with scant courtesy and ridiculed. But he went on indifferent alike to praise and blame, as he has himself sung in his song of the Sannyasin:

"Head then no more, how body haves or goes, Its task
is done. Let Karma float it down; Let one put garlands
on, another kick This frame, saw naught.

Have thou no home. What home can hold thee, friend!

The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed, and food

What chance may bring; well cooked or ill judge not.

Few may know the Truth, The first will hate And
scoff at thee, great one; but pay no heed; Go thou the
free, from place to place, and help

Them out of darkness, Maya's

Thus he went throughout the country, from the
snowclad.

Amarnath in the North to the warm South, he saw the pitiable condition into which the people had sunk. In Ramnad he met the Sethupethi Raja of Ramnad, who became one of his very warm admirers. When he reached the southernmost extremity of India, Capt Comarift, he worshipped at the Mother's temple and retired to a rock which was separate from the mainland farther south of the Cape. The ocean tossed and stormed on all sides; but in his mind there was even a greater tempest. Sitting on the last rock of India, her whole history came before his mind's eye. He meditated on the glorious past of the country, the time when she produced the noblest and the greatest thoughts which the human mind could conceive, namely the Upanishads, the Gita and the Thirukkural, when wise men from all over the world came to India to learn the highest truths; the later days when India degenerated and lost her freedom, the Muslim invasions the desecration and destruction of temples, the more recent foreign domination by the West, and the present deplorable position of the people. Tears flowed from his eyes. When he thought how the children of the rishis had become next door neighbours to beasts, his heart wept. Agony wrung his soul when he saw how the very persons who should have been their guardians and teachers were ill-treating the downtrodden millions and how the autocracy of priesthood, the despotism of caste, and the resulting division in society had caused the downfall of India. Out of this great feeling for the masses, his heart went out in prayer to the great mother of the universe for the regeneration of our country and humanity. This was a turning point in the history of Indian culture and society. To commemorate this historic event a beautiful temple has been built on the very rock on which he meditated.

From that moment, he dedicated his life to the service of the country and the people, particularly to those who were poor and downtrodden. To him religion was no longer a matter of personal

realisation of God, but the realisation of God in all living being through service to them. Worship was no more rituals and ceremonial offerings in the temples, but service of mankind and alleviation of human suffering.

It was during these wanderings that he heard about the Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago in 1893. His friends and admirers, pressed him to go to America to participate in it. But he hesitated; for he wanted to know the Divine will.

Twice his admirers and students in Madras collected funds for the purpose and twice he had them distributed among the poor. He prayed to the Master for guidance. One night as he lay in his bed half asleep, the command came to him. The Swami saw the figure of his Master Sri Ramakrishna, walking into the waters of the sea beckoning him to follow. He construed it as the command of the Master to go to the Parliament of Religions and, after getting the blessings of the Holy Mother, prepared to leave India.

When he arrived in the United States of America, he was told that every delegate to the Parliament of Religions had to produce certificates from authorised bodies that he was an accredited representative of his religion. But he had no certificate from anybody and it looked as if he would not be allowed to attend the meeting and his coming to America was in vain. Then he met Prof. Wright while travelling in a train and they started talking. Noticing Swami Vivekananda's sparkling intelligence and spiritual fervour, the professor remarked, "To demand a certificate from you is like asking the Sun for its title to shine. He then gave a letter of introduction to the Chairman of the Parliament of Religions.

Then the Swami heard that the meeting of the Parliament of Religions had been postponed. In the meantime his money was exhausted. He did not know what to do. Then by chance he became acquainted with some people-these were later to become his ardent disciples who, attracted by his purity and spiritual demeanour invited him to their home. At last the meeting of the Parliament of Religions was drawing near and he left for Chicago where it was to be held. It was dark when he reached Chicago and he did not know the way. In bitter cold, he slept on a haystack that night. When he got up in the morning he did not know where to go. Then a most surprising thing happened. The door of the

house opposite opened and a lady by name Mrs. Hale came out and asked whether he had come to attend the Parliament of Religions. On his saying yes, she took him into the house and accommodated him.

The great success that attended Swami Vivekananda in the Parliament of Religions is well known. It is part of history and need not be recapitulated here. The Parliament consisted of the most distinguished men representing all the great religions of the World. Most of them were celebrities, while he was not known at all. Even the previous night he had to sleep on a haystack. At last when he was asked to speak, his face glowed with fire. Uttering silent prayer to Goddess Saraswati, he began his address with the words, "Sisters and Brothers of America". The effect was electric. The whole assembly was caught up by a wave of enthusiasm. Everyone was cheering. In a few words, he gave his great message of the Harmony of Religions. From that day he became the favourite speaker in the Parliament of Religions. The newspapers paid him glorious tributes. Thousands waited for hours to hear him speak. He was invited by the highest in the land and treated royally.

But in that hour of glory, when any other person might have been elated by success, the Swami felt very diffident. That night he could not sleep. His mind and thoughts were with the poor and the hunger-stricken millions of India. The pillow became wet with his tears. At length, overcome with emotion, he fell to the ground crying out "O Mother! What do I care for name and fame when my motherland remains sunk in utmost poverty? When millions in India die for want of a handful of rice, here they spend millions! Who will raise the masses of India? Who will give them bread? O Mother! Show me the way to help them!" This feeling further strengthened his resolve to serve his countrymen.

When, after his great success in the Parliament of Religions at Chicago and his triumphal march from one city to another in the United States of America, he returned to India he received an ovation and welcome of which even emperors would be proud. He became the symbol of the glory that was India's spirituality. In Madras the enthusiasm was so great that particularly, the students unharnessed the horse of his carriage and pulled it themselves. In Calcutta, his home town, he was given a hero's

welcome. Millions of people throughout the country heard him and worshipped him. The speeches he gave during those days, published under the title *Lectures from Colombo to Almora* are a glorious piece of literature. Such was the charm and force of these lectures that Romain Rolland, the great French savant, on reading them thirty years later was moved to write: "His words are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are, through the pages of books, at thirty years' distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports must have been produced, when in burning words they issued from the lips of the hero."

His bold spiritual message inspired millions of people and attracted many disciples in the East and West. Some of the most important western disciples were Sister Nivedita from England, who dedicated her whole life for the service of the poor and down-trodden in India and Mr. and Mrs. Sevier, who were largely responsible for the founding of the monastery at Mayavati in the Himalayas. Sister Nivedita will be long remembered for her services during the outbreak of plague in "Calcutta" where the grateful people have constructed a school for girls in her name.

The Swami established a math in Belur near Calcutta to train young men in the great ideals of renunciation and dedicated service. This became the centre of all his activities and later the headquarters of the mighty organisation now known as the Sri Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

Under the strain of incessant work Swami Vivekananda became weak. His last two months were full of indications that his sojourn on the earth was about to end. The Swami himself had said that he would not live to complete forty years of his life.

Sri Ramakrishna had said that once Naren became aware of who he was, he would not remain long in this world. Someone humorously asked whether he knew who he was, and he replied "Yes I know." A few days before his samadhi he had invited a few of his disciples. To one of these, Sister Nivedita, he insisted on serving the meal himself. Sister Nivedita protested, "Swami,

it is I who should be serving you". Swami Vivekanandji answered, "Did not Jesus wash the feet of his disciples?".

On the day of the mahasamadhi itself, his actions were deliberate and significant. He went into the Shrine and meditated for full three hours. After the meditation while walking about in the courtyard, he was heard muttering to himself "Many more Vivekanandas will come". He then held his last class for the Brahmacharis. To Swami Prermananda, one of his brother disciples, he explained his plans, as though he was giving his last instructions. A few days earlier he had pointed out the place where he wanted his body to be cremated. At the place there now stands a temple built in his memory. As the evening came, his mind became more and more withdrawn. After meditating and praying for about an hour, he lay down in bed. Then came two deep breaths—that was all. The Swamiji had given up his body, as it were, by an act of will and entered into mahasamadhi.

Swami Vivekananda is no more with us in body, but his spirit and his message continue to inspire us. That message is as much for the World as for India and will continue to inspire millions of people for ages to come.

That message, if it can be put in a few words, is: Renounce the lower pleasures; Realise your Divine nature and dedicate yourself to the service of God in the form of the poor and the downtrodden. Awake, Arise and Stop not till the goal is reached!