CHAPTER-IV

LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA
CHAPTER-IV

LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

“He is not a pond, he is reservoir. He is not a pitcher or a jug, he is a veritable barrel. He is not a minnow, he is a huge red-eyed carp. He is not an ordinary sixteen – petalled lotus – he is a glorious lotus with a thousand petals.”

-Sri Ramakrishna

Swami Vivekananda, in his early life was known as Narendra Nath Datta. He was born in an affluent Kshatriya family in Kolkata on twelfth of January 1863. His father, Vishwanath Datta, was a successful attorney with interests in a wide range of subjects, and his mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, was endowed with deep devotion, strong character and other qualities of head and heart. A precocious boy, Narendra excelled in music, gymnastics and studies. By the time he graduated from Calcutta University, he had acquired a vast knowledge of different subjects, especially western philosophy and history. Born with a Yogic temperament, he used to practice meditation even from his boyhood. He was an earnest student of philosophy and poetry. He studied all the system of Western Philosophy and became very well acquainted with the contemporary philosophy of Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill. Wordsworth and Shelley were his favourite poets. Once the principal of his college Mr. Hastie remarked, “Narendra Nath is really a genius. I have travelled for and wide, but I have never yet come across a lad of his talents and possibilities, even in German Universities amongst philosophical students. He is bound to make his mark in life.” (quoted by Sarma, 1944)
With Sri Ramakrishna

At the threshold of youth Narendra had to pass though a period of spiritual crisis when he was assailed by doubts about the existence of God. It was at that time he first heard about Sri Ramakrishna from one of his English Professors at College. One day in November 1881, Narendra went to meet Sri Ramakrishna who was staying at the Kali Temple in Dakshineshwar and was conquered. He straightway asked the master a question which he had put to several other but had received no satisfactory answer. “Sir, have you seen God?” Without a moment’s hesitation, Sri Ramakrishna replied: “Yes, I have. I see Him as clearly as I see you, only in a much intenser sense.”

Apart from removing doubts from the mind of Narendra, Sri Ramakrishna won him over through his pure, unselfish love. Thus began a guru-disciple relationship which is quite unique in the history of spiritual masters. Narendra now became a frequent visitor to Dakshineshwar and, under the guidance of the Master, made rapid strides on the spiritual path. At Dakshineshwar, Narendra also met several young men who were devoted to Sri Ramakrishna, and they all became his close friends. From here began a new chapter in the history of Hinduism.

Difficult Situations

After a few years, events took place which caused Narendra considerable distress. One was the sudden death of his father in 1884. This left the family penniless, and Narendra had to bear the burden of supporting his mother, brothers and sisters. The second event was the illness of Sri Ramakrishna which was diagnosed to be cancer of the throat. In September 1885 Sri Ramakrishna was moved to a house at Shyampukur, and a few months later to a rented villa at Cossipore. In these two places the young disciple nursed the Master with devoted
care. In spite of poverty at home and inability to find a job for himself, Narendra joined the group as its leader.

**Beginning of a Monastic Brotherhood**

Sri Ramakrishna instilled in these young men the spirit of renunciation and brotherly love for one another. One day he distributed ochre robes among them and sent them out to bring food. In this way he himself laid the foundation for a new monastic order. He gave specific instructions to Narendra about the formation of the new monastic order. In the small hours of August 16, 1886 Sri Ramakrishna gave up his mortal body. After the Master's passing, fifteen of his young disciples (One more joined them later) began to live together in a dilapidated building at Baranagar in North Kolkata. Under the leadership of Narendra, they formed a new monastic brotherhood, and in 1887 they took the formal vows of Sanyas, thereby assuming new names. Narendra now became Swami Vivekananda (although this name was actually assumed much later).

**Awareness of Life's Mission**

After establishing the new monastic order, Vivekananda heard the inner call for a greater mission in his life. While most of the followers of Sri Ramakrishna thought of him in relation to their own personal lives, Vivekananda thought of the Master in relation to India and the rest of the world.

**Discovery of Real India**

During his travels all over India, Swami Vivekananda was deeply moved to see the appalling poverty and backwardness of the masses. He was the first religious leader in India to understand and openly declare that the real cause of India's downfall was the neglect of the masses. The immediate need was to provide food and other bare
necessities of life to the hungry millions. For this they should be taught improved methods of agriculture, village industries, etc. (which had escaped the attention of social reformers of his days) owing to centuries of oppression, the downtrodden masses had lost faith in their capacity to improve their lot. It was first of all necessary to infuse into their minds faith in themselves. For this they needed a life giving, inspiring message.

Thus the masses needed two kinds of knowledge: Secular knowledge to improve their economic condition, and spiritual knowledge to infuse in them faith in themselves and strengthen their moral sense. The next question was, how to spread these two kinds of knowledge among the masses? Through education—this was the answer that Swamiji found.

Parliament of Religions

Swami Vivekananda heard about the World’s Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago in 1893. His friends and admirers in India wanted him to attend the parliament. He too felt that the parliament would provide the right forum to present his Master’s message to the world, and so he decided to go to America. Another reason which prompted Swamiji to go to America was to seek financial help for his project of uplifting the masses.

His speeches at the world’s Parliament of Religions held in September 1893 made him famous as an ‘orator by divine right’ and as a ‘Messenger of Indian wisdom to the Western world’. After the parliament, Swami ji spent nearly three and a half years spreading Vedanta as lived and taught by Sri Ramakrishna, mostly in the eastern parts of USA and also in London. He travelled extensively in the west teach the Vedanta philosophy and became known as ‘wondering monk’ (Swami Abhedananda, 1939).
Awakening His Countrymen

He returned to India in January 1897. In response to the enthusiastic welcome that he received everywhere, he delivered a series of lectures in different parts of India, which created a great stir all over the country. Through these inspiring and profoundly significant lectures Swamiji attempted to do the following:

- To rouse the religious consciousness of the people and create in them pride in their cultural heritage.
- To bring about unification of Hinduism by pointing out the common bases of its sects.
- To focus the attention of educated people on the plight of the downtrodden masses, and to expound his plan for their upliftment by application of the principles of practical Vedanta.

Disciples

It may be mentioned here that in the West many people were influenced by Swami Vivekananda’s life and message. Some of them became his disciples or devoted friends. Among them the names of Margeret Noble (later known as Sister Nivedita), Caption and Mrs. Sevier, Josephine MCleod, and Sara ole Bull, deserve special mention. Nivedita dedicated her life to educate girls in Calcutta. Swamiji had many Indian disciples also, some of whom joined Ramakrishna Math and became sannyasins.

Swami Vivekanand did for the gospel of Sri Ramakrishna what St. Paul did for the gospel of Christ. He broadcasted the truths of Vedanta in India, demonstrated to the world that the great Indian spiritual tradition was still alive and vigorous. He showed both by precept and example that, if the ancient Vedanta were reinterpreted in the light of Sr. Ramakrishna’s spiritual experiences as applied to
modern life, India would be able to solve many of her problems and would rise once again to deliver a message to humanity. He taught theoretical Vedanta in the West and practical Vedanta in India. He urged for the uplift of the masses and wanted to make them strong and self-reliant. As he had sympathy for the poor and downtrodden in India, he was a fore-runner of Mahatma Gandhi. He pleaded for social reform in India and for religious freedom in the West. He recommended Vedanta for all without any distinction of the caste, colour, creed or sex. He repeatedly asserted that Indians had become weak and poor because they did not apply their Vedanta to life. He asserted that India needs strength giving religion and a man-making education.

**Last Days**

In June 1899 he went to the west on a second visit. This time he spent most of his time in the West coast of USA. After delivering many lectures there, he turned to Belur Math in December 1900. The rest of his life was spent in India, inspiring and guiding people, both monastic and lay. Incessant work, especially giving lectures and inspiring people, affected Swamiji's health. His health deteriorated and the end came quietly on the night of **July 4th, 1902**. Before his Mahasamadhi he had written to a western follower. “It may be that I shall find it good to get outside my body, to cast it off like a worn out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere until the whole world shall know that it is one with God.”

******