

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

THE ESSENTIALS OF SPIRITUAL TRADITION OF INDIA Swami Gautamananda

At the outset let me quote Sister Nivedita who remarked in her Introduction to The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda that '... India, with her thousands of years of national development . . . had sounded many things, proved many things, and realised almost all, save only her own perfect unanimity as to certain fundamental and essential truths, held by all her people in common'. She was thus referring to the fact that Swami Vivekananda had successfully accomplished this unique job.

All spiritual traditions of India are essentially Vedic. Vedic religion has been the backbone of Indian religions and culture since several thousand years. It is this Vedic spiritual tradition that has made India the cradle of a faith which has no fear of truth and a religion with the highest rationality, as Sister Nivedita put it. Swami Vivekananda spoke about these essentials of the spiritual tradition of India, which he called Hinduism and Vedanta, in his lectures in the West and East. His exposition is so simple, straight and masterly that I propose to follow his line in this short lecture. Swami Vivekananda dealt with these essentials of Indian spiritual tradition in his immortal work Lectures from Colombo to Almora.

India's first love, religion

On his successful return from America, he was given an unprecedented welcome at Colombo Port on 15th January 1897, which he accepted as an honour shown to the spirituality of India which he represented as a monk. He stressed that it revealed the unique Indian mind which loved religion more than anything else. In this connection he prophesied that '... hence again [from India] must start the wave which is going to spiritualise the material civilisation of the world. Here is the life-giving water with which must be quenched the burning fire of materialism which is burning the core of the hearts of millions in other lands. Believe me, my friends, this is going to be'. (Complete Works, Vol. III p. 105) We should note here that Swami Vivekananda was making this most optimistic statement in 1897 when India was in her worst socio-political slavery under the British! He said again and again that India's spiritual traditions were older than any in the West just to undo the brainwashing of the educated Indians done by the politically-biased historians of the West.

Swami Vivekananda rejected the claims to universality by those religions which were full of dogmas and doctrines, which were irrational, unscientific and unprovable. In contrast, he said that Indian spiritual religion called Vedanta or Hinduism can stand the test of reason of the latest science. In his Paper on Hinduism delivered at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893, Swamiji explained that among the three great pre-historic religions [Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Judaism], Hinduism has alone survived undimmed in its grandeur till today because of its certain unique essential characteristics. What are they?

Uniqueness of Hinduism

In the first place, Hinduism is all-inclusive, never exclusive. It has a place for the highest philosophy as well as the beginners' ideas of idolatry, rituals, mythology and a place for even agnosticism and atheism. 'Where is the common centre for all these to converge?' asked Swami Vivekananda and answers: The eternal laws of spiritual world Hindus have received through revelation in the Vedas. Vedas are the accumulated treasures of spiritual laws discovered by seers called the Rishis. These concern the eternal laws that govern creation, individual souls, God, and their relations with God.

The Vedas say that creation is without beginning and end, even as God, the Creator is. They declare 'Suryachandramasaudhàta . . . yatha purvamakalpayat', ie 'God created the sun and the moon as He

had done in the previous cycles of creation'. Then the idea of God and soul is explained. Strangely enough, Swamiji never discussed the three states of wakefulness, dream and deep sleep, called the avasthàtraya in classical Vedanta, to argue for the existence of an independent and immortal consciousness, the àtman, which is different from body, mind and the external universe. Instead, like a modern psychologist, he tells us to try to conceive the nature of ourselves by contemplating the meaning of 'I' (as ourselves). Generally we can think that we are only the body. Swamiji now asks, 'Can we, who have intelligence and consciousness, be called the unconscious dead matter?' He says that it is the direct experience of innumerable Rishis that man is the 'soul, the spirit' living in the body but not confined to the material body. We, as àtman, continue to live even when our bodies die.

We may ask why we should accept the words of the Rishis? The answer is, because it is their direct experience, not a sensory experience. They experienced àtman in Yoga or Samàdhi. It was an intuitive experience, but all the same a direct experience.

We remember here the incident of rational Narendra (later Swami Vivekananda) meeting Sri Ramakrishna, the sage of Dakshineswar, and asking him if he had seen God. Sri Ramakrishna's reply was, 'Yes, I have, and more clearly than how I see you'. This reply changed the course of Narendra's life, who later preached that 'religion was realisation'.

Unequal in birth

There are other reasons also why the soul is to be considered immortal. We see that some beings are born happy. They enjoy perfect physical and mental health and roll in wealth from their very birth. But some others are born otherwise, ie miserable, maimed, lacking in mental growth, etc. Can a just God create such horribly disparate beings? 'No', say the Vedas. Hence there must be some cause created by each soul which, as its effect, brings the joys or miseries. This inequality in birth proves the previous existence of the soul. There are other reasons as well. For example, we see some special inherited attitudes and aptitudes in child prodigies in music, mathematics etc., in almost every country.

This also proves previous existence of the soul. In the year 2000, thousands of people saw among the music performers on the occasion of the consecration of our Universal Temple of Sri Ramakrishna at Chennai, an eight and a half year-old girl giving a music concert of over two hours. She has been performing this feat from her 5th year. She could identify rāga and rāginis of Carnatic music even when she was not even three!

Modern biologists say that the inherited tendencies are transmitted physically from father to mother. If consciousness or intelligence is transmitted through some physical matter from father to mother, the father should then become less and less intelligent as the number of his children increase, which we see is absurd. Hence the pre-existence of the soul has to be granted even by the biologists. The Rishis of India confirm that they have directly experienced this àtman's immortal, all-blissful and all-knowing existence.

Some people ask: Why don't we remember then our past lives if we had one? Swamiji says, suppose, we do not remember some part of our childhood, does that mean we did not have that part? Further, Swamiji says that by proper training in Yoga, anyone can remember all one's and even other's past and future as well! He himself told Mrs Emma Calve, the famous opera singer, many of her past experiences which none but she herself knew!

The glories of àtman

Now, the central theme of the Indian spiritual tradition, the àtman and its nature are explained. This àtman, the sword cannot cut, nor the fire burn; water cannot wet nor the air dry, because the àtman is subtler than all of them. In the second chapter of the Gità, Sri Krishna says, 'Nainam chindanti shastràni nainam dahati pàvakah I Na cainam kledayantyàpo na shoshayati marutah II'. This àtman is all-pervading which means that it is everywhere and can see everything anywhere. It is unbounded, free, holy, pure and perfect. Absolute fearlessness or abhayam is the characteristic of the àtman.

The question arises: Why does the free and perfect soul get into bondage and is deluded into believing that it is the body? Argument that karma of the previous birth is responsible for the predicament cannot simply satisfy. So, the Vedas say that we cannot know the answer of this question just as a man in a dream cannot find out why or how he got into the dream. If, somehow, he comes out of the dream, he can see some reason for his dream. So also, say the Vedas, when one realizes one's àtman, one can know why a soul got into the so-called 'bondage' but never before that. Thus, the Vedas declare that our soul goes on evolving or reverting back from birth to birth, depending on our actions being good or bad respectively. Good actions take us into higher birth and joy and bad actions take us into lower birth and sorrow.

The freedom

Now the question comes: Is there a way out of this unending, cruel wheel of birth and death? One Vedic Rishi of the Shvetàshvatara Upanishad joyfully answers, yes, there is a way. And then in a triumphant voice he utters the following words: 'Hear ye children of Immortal Bliss, and ye that reside in the higher spheres! I have found the Ancient One who is beyond all darkness, all delusion. Knowing Him alone you shall be saved from death over and over again'.

Here we find two wonderful Vedic truths. The one is that man is a child of Eternal Bliss and not a born sinner as some religions proclaim. The second is that though there are the unforgiving laws of cause and effect, there is at the head of all these laws, in and through every particle of matter and force, the One God by whose command the wind blows, the fire burns, the clouds rain and death stalks upon the earth, as the Katha Upanishad says. Here Vedanta teaches the spiritual Oneness of the universe and suggests that even the so-called material particles and atoms are nothing but Spirit in their essence-what to speak of man, whom the Vedas called 'a child of Immortal bliss!' Sri Ramakrishna explained to his disciples how he saw that 'even stones jumped like living beings'.

God and His nature

Now we come to the idea of God, the endearing theme of all spiritual traditions of India. Vedas describe God as omnipresent, pure, almighty and all-merciful. 'Thou art our father, our mother, our beloved friend'-that is the attitude. God is not here a mere judge or a ruler but He is our own beloved one. This is the conclusion of the Vedas. And Sri Ramakrishna says, though God is formless, He assumes human forms (Avatàra) and various divine forms because He loves His creation. Hence, worship of God should be not out of fear, not for asking any favours, but to express our love by all means. This particular idea of God as a loving being was developed further and taught by Sri Krishna, the God incarnate, in his immortal message of the Bhagavad Gità.

Sri Krishna taught that a man in the world should do all his duties without any selfish motives, for achieving the good of others and consider doing such works as the worship of God who is in every being. This is the Karmayoga which is 'giving one's heart to God and one's hands to work'. This path of dedicated work says that it is good to love God for reward in this or other world, but it is best to love Him for His own sake. There is a prayer in Sanskrit called 'Mukundamàlà stotra' composed by Alwar Kulashekhara that says:

Nàsthà dharme na vasu nichaye naiva yad bhàvyam tad bhavatu bhagavan	kàmopabhoge purvakarmànurupam I
Yetat pràrthyam mama bahumatam Twat padàmbhoruhayugatà nishchalà	janma janmàntareapi bhaktirastu II

The meaning of this prayer is: 'Beloved Lord, I do not want fame of righteousness nor wealth nor sense-enjoyments. Whatever should befall me according to my previous karma, let it. But my only prayer to You, O Lord, is that in every birth, You bestow on me the unwavering devotion to Your lotus feet'.

Thus a wonderful current of divine love flowed through a galaxy of saints and seers, who loved both God and His creation. Their acts of service to society were extraordinary when compared to the works of the so-called social leaders and reformers because unfathomable love of the saints saw humanity as the children of God!

Swami Akhandananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, before his death prayed: 'Give me, O man, all your sins and take all my meritorious acts (punya). I have no fear, because I know I belong to Sri Ramakrishna.' This great Swami had scaled the crest of spirituality by rendering loving service to the needy whom he considered God Himself.

Mukti and its means

Vedas teach that the *âtman* is divine, holy and perfect. Only the individual self thinks ignorantly that it is the body. When this ignorance goes, freedom from all fears of death and diseases, anxieties and miseries of life come to an end. This is called *mukti*, *moksha* or spiritual freedom. What is the means of attaining *moksha*? It is attained through the mercy of God, and this mercy of God comes to those who are pure. God reveals Himself to the pure in heart, even in this very life. Those liberated ones are called the *jivan-mukta*, the 'living free'. Then all doubts disappear. The *jivan-muktas* go beyond all the terrible laws of causation.

This is the very centre of Vedic spiritual tradition that one can experience one's Self and God and become free even while living in this body. The best proof of God in Indian spiritual tradition is that He has been seen by numberless sages of the past. You and I also can see Him and there will be enough such seers in the future also. Thus, for the Hindus, religion is realizing God and soul, not merely believing in some doctrines and dogmas. The spiritual quest in India therefore means the struggle to become perfect, to become divine, to reach God and to see God and become perfect. Such a person becomes a saint and a mystic and lives in bliss infinite; he becomes one with Brahman. This is the common idea of a realized person in all religious traditions in India.

Individuality and Brahman

Here a question is raised: How a person can retain his individuality if he becomes one with Brahman? If one has lost one's individuality and has become one with Him, who will then enjoy God?

Swami Vivekananda gives a beautiful explanation. He says, 'If it is happiness to enjoy the consciousness of this small body, it must be greater happiness to enjoy the consciousness of two bodies, the measure of happiness increasing with the consciousness of an increasing number of bodies, until the happiness becomes infinite with the Universal Consciousness felt through infinite bodies!' Swami Vivekananda, for example, awoke with pain in Belur monastery when Philippines was rocked by an earthquake!

Renunciation and spiritual joy

Now comes an interesting idea regarding the relation between renunciation and spiritual joy. To gain this infinite universal consciousness, the consciousness of this miserable little individual must go. Then we become one with the whole of life; as our death and miseries will go, we will become one with infinite happiness and as we become one with the infinite knowledge, our errors and sins will also go.

Even modern science has proved that physically all of us are part of a universe of matter. So does Advaita. The experience of a non-dual, infinite spiritual consciousness proves that all our souls are part of a Supreme Soul, the Brahman! We can experience this infinite joy by renouncing the 'finite'. We see that physical sciences become more and more perfect as they approach unity through finding general laws behind the varied individual phenomena. Similarly, with the finding of the one non-dual consciousness of Brahman we reach perfection in spiritual knowledge. There cannot be anything higher than that perfection. Swami Vivekananda asserts here that 'all science is bound to come to this

conclusion in the long run'. What science says today as the law of conservation of matter and energy, that no new creation can be made out of nothing, the Hindu spiritual traditions had come to that conclusion long, long ago!

The idols and symbols

Now we come to the vexed question of the criticism of idols and symbols in religion. First of all, idols need not be thought of as works of a devil. On the contrary, they enable numberless beginners to hang their spiritual ideas on and progress in spiritual life gradually towards higher and higher conceptions of God. For example, many saints have worshipped God through idols in the beginning of their spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna also worshipped Kàli, Shiva, and so on. If we do not accept this fact, we give place to superstitions and much worse, to bigotry, and break the idols of others to create inter and intra-religious wars, all in the name of God! Hindus associate ideas of holiness, purity, truth, omnipresence, etc. with different images. As one progresses, one goes beyond the idol-worship but never criticizes it because it may be needed by other beginners. The Hindu understands that religion lies in realization and the idols, temples, churches, and symbols only help in that quest.

There is a beautiful Sanskrit verse which says 'Prathama pratimà pujà japasthotradhi madhyama I Uttama manasi puja Sohambrahmethyuttamottama II That is, primary stage is the idol-worship, japam and prayers are middle stage, higher than that is mental worship and the highest is to realize oneself as one with the highest Brahman. When child is the father of man, would it be right for the father to call childhood a sin?

Unity in diversity

In the light of the above facts, the Hindu has recognized that unity in variety is the plan of nature, whereas other religions lay down some fixed dogmas and try to force everyone in society to adopt them. However, though Hinduism does not advocate so, it believes that some may not need any symbols at all. To the Hindu, all religions are paths leading to the same goal, viz., God. They believe that all religions have come into being by the will of God. God runs through all religions as a thread among the beads in a rosary. The Bhagavad Gità says, 'Mayi sarvamidam protam sutre maniganà iva'. ('In Me all the creatures are strung as the beads are on a string to form a necklace'.) This grand idea has brought out the greatest tolerance and grand acceptance of all religions by the Hindus.

Swamiji therefore challenged the other religionists to show even a single statement of exclusiveness in the whole of Sanskrit philosophy saying that the Hindu alone will be saved and not others. This is the greatest message of Hinduism to all the exclusive religions which are at each others' throats, throwing up in the process jehadism and terrorism of the worst type which may destroy the whole world specially if the terrorists get hold of nuclear weapons!

Call for a universal religion

Swamiji declared that if there should be a universal religion, it should be applicable to all places and all times, it should adopt the followers of all paths to God alike; it should welcome the saints and sinners alike; it should have scope to accept the future religions also. Moreover, it should be a religion with no place for persecution or intolerance; it should recognize divinity in every man and woman and encourage them to manifest it.

To conclude, we see that the essentials of spiritual traditions of India point to the truth of God's existence, spiritual oneness of all creation, and the divinity of man. They assert that all religions are true and a harmony of all of them is not only possible, it is also the need of the time. Vedanta philosophy and religion alone can help establish such a HARMONY. Swami Vivekananda set up the Ramakrishna Mission to make these grand realizations of Sri Ramakrishna practical as these form the Essentials of Spiritual Tradition of India. The doors of this Jagannath Temple are open to all humanity.

* Swami Gautamananda, who is the President, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai, delivered this lecture in memory of Swami Shankaranandaji Maharaj at the Institute on 14 October 2006.