

# I Love Human Vivekananda

**Asim Choudhuri**

I am overwhelmed, but I accept the Vivekananda Award with gratitude and humility. It is all Swamiji's work. The Award emphasizes the need for and the importance of keeping alive Swamiji's mission, work, life and message in people's mind. I consider myself very fortunate to be able to contribute a little toward that end.

In 1992, on the eve of the 100th anniversary of the Parliament of Religions, I was staying in Chicago. I was transferred to Chicago from Cleveland a little earlier. So in retrospect, the transfer seemed providential because if I had not been in Chicago in 1992, I probably would not have been standing here in front of you. Doing school in Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar, Swami Vivekananda was no stranger to me. Nevertheless, pressures of life, especially working in a foreign country, raising family in a foreign land, forced me to temporarily ignore the call of my soul. But it all came back to me in 1992. I started reading about the great soul and Sister Gargi's book inspired me to follow his footprints around the world. I owe Sister Gargi a monumental debt of gratitude. My effort to trace Swami Vivekananda's footprints have culminated into two books—Swami Vivekananda in Chicago—New Findings and Swami Vivekananda in America—New Findings.

A question may arise in our minds: why spend so much energy and time to trace Swamiji's footprints? I can give you a very simple answer—I love him. I do not want his footprints to fade away and disappear. There is a little story associated with this. Once in 2005, I was trying to follow his footprints in Des Moines which is about 200 miles west of Chicago. So I left my home in Phoenix at 5am, flew to Kansas City, about 1200 miles away, rented a car, drove to Des Moines, another 250 miles, and went to the public library there. In the public library I looked for the newspapers which were published in November, 1893. I looked at those newspapers, got the information and armed with that information I went to the Church where Swamiji lectured. I met the pastor. He gave all the newsletters and some very valuable information of that era. By the time I finished talking to the pastor and taking snaps, it was 9 pm. So I went to a Chinese restaurant for dinner. After dinner, it is customary in Chinese restaurants in America to bring in fortune-cookies. So I cracked open a cookie. Instead of the usual messages that one finds in a fortune-cookie like 'You are kind-hearted and socially active' or 'You will land in your dream job in no time', what I found was totally different. I found the message which said—'The way to love anything is to realize that it might be lost.' Now the mystic in me interpreted the message as being related to my Vivekananda's dream for I have followed Swamiji's wanderings in America for the last 16-18 years.

My very first encounter with Swamiji in American newspapers was a comment about Swamiji, where the editor said, 'Cull from the dictionary a hundred superlative adjectives, descriptive of the most highest, cultivated, and active intellectual; then go and hear Vivekananda. Before he has talked ten minutes, you will toss your collection of choice adjectives in the waste-basket and acknowledge your inability to describe this wonderful man.' Believe me, I have seen many, many newspapers and reviews about Swamiji, but I think this is the most telling.

I would say a few words about Swamiji, strictly from my own perspective. Most of us are familiar with Swamiji's meditative posture, sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, with his clasped hands placed on his lap. But have you ever visualized Swamiji sitting on a sofa next to a fireplace on a cold snowy afternoon in Minneapolis after taking a sleigh ride in the park, smoking a cigar, blowing smoke-rings

above his head and talking about Wordsworth's or Longfellow's literary creations? I have. You have heard about a calm and serene Vivekananda, sitting cross-legged under the pine tree in Greenacre, Maine, and expounding Advaita Vedanta. Have you ever visualized him losing his cool and snubbing a person? That happened in a Boston house where he gave a lecture. After the lecture, a lady confronted him and said, 'Swami, I don't like your religion. It doesn't have love in it.' Swami Vivekananda responded in a heated tone, 'Madam, I didn't make Hindu religion. I am just here to expound it, whether you like it or not.' You have heard of Swamiji experiencing nirvikalpa samàdhi in New Hampshire, in Camp Percy near Francis Leggett's cottage. I see Vivekananda eagerly waiting at the dinner table for his share of chocolate ice-cream! You think of Vivekananda giving spellbinding lecture at the Parliament of Religions followed by a thunderous applause from the audience. I see him going back to Michigan in Bagley's house and pouring a generous amount of Tabasco sauce on his bland American food to suit his palate.

Then I can visualize him taking Cornelia, the granddaughter of his friend, on his lap and telling her stories from the Pancatantra. Thus, I see the human side of Vivekananda and I can feel good because I can relate him to our familiar life-stream. I can revere, admire and prostrate before the spiritual Vivekananda, but I love this human Vivekananda; not that I love spiritual Vivekananda any less, but I love human Vivekananda more. Of course, I have to admit that it is his spiritual side that makes his human side exceedingly appealing. He was truly a fusion of the East and the West, a synthesis of spirituality and humanity.

What knowledge have I gained from following Swamiji's footprints around the world? A good deal, but nothing that you don't know already or that you cannot acquire. These are all in the nine volumes of The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. No matter what you do in life—you may be a businessman, a teacher, or a professor, a student, a taxi-driver, whoever you are, the road map as to how you should conduct your life is given in those nine volumes. I sincerely believe those volumes should be mandatory reading for the politicians. Yes, for the politicians, who are steering India's future. Why? It is because in those nine volumes one can find the recipes for rejuvenated India. That was Swami Vivekananda's dream! Only Vivekananda knew what he had done for India and for the whole human race. We should consider ourselves blessed if we know a very little of what he had done.

---

\* This is the abridged text of the speech Sri Asim Choudhuri delivered at the Institute after he was presented the Vivekananda Award 2009 on 18 March.