

The Transformation from Narendranath to Vivekananda¹

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Today we are celebrating a very auspicious occasion, as all of us from all over the world have come here to pay our homage to Swami Vivekananda in connection with his 150th birth anniversary. Chicago is a very, very holy place. Swamiji arrived here on 30 July 1893 and he gave his maiden speech on 11 September 1893. He was Sri Ramakrishna's "vāṇī mūrti" — that is, his manifested "Voice Form". Swamiji himself implied this when he said, "All the ideas that I preach are only an attempt to echo his [Ramakrishna's] ideas."

When I first walked on the shore of Lake Michigan in 1972, I tried to imagine that Swamiji had nirvikalpa samadhi somewhere around that place. Perhaps when you walk there you also may think of it. There are so many wonderful episodes connected with Swamiji in Chicago. One touching incident comes to my mind. When Swamiji was leaving Chicago for the last time, in 1900, for India, he stayed a few days with the Hale family. On the morning of his departure, Mary Hale came to the Swami's room and found him sad. His bed appeared to be untouched, and on being

¹ This article is based on a lecture given on 9 November 2013 at the Hilton Hotel, Chicago, on the occasion of the convention "Chicago Calling", organized by Swami Ishatmananda.

asked the reason, he confessed that he had spent the whole night without sleep. "Oh," he said, "it is so difficult to break human bonds!" Swamiji knew that this was the last time he was to see these devoted friends.

My topic for today is 'The transformation from Narendranath to Vivekananda'. Vivekananda was born on 12 January 1863, and was brought up having a Western education which taught him not to accept anything without evidence. He gradually became well versed in both Eastern and Western thought. There are a few important qualities that we see in Narendranath's life at that time. First, he had a tremendous passion for Truth. Second, he overflowed with excessive energy -- too much energy. Third, he was a rebel. His classmate Brajendranath Seal wrote: "Undeniably a gifted youth, sociable, free and unconventional in manners, a sweet singer, the soul of social circles, a brilliant conversationalist, somewhat bitter and caustic, piercing with shafts of a keen wit the shows and mummeries of the world, sitting in the scorner's chair but hiding the tenderest of hearts under that garb of cynicism; altogether an inspired Bohemian but possessing what Bohemians lack -- an iron will; somewhat peremptory and absolute, speaking with accents of authority and withal possessing a strange power of the eye which could hold his listeners in thrall."

This rebel came to Sri Ramakrishna in 1881. As a rebel, he did not like some aspects of Hinduism. First he did not care for the caste system, and he hated child-marriage from the bottom of his heart. He also abhorred image-worship, the neglect of women's education, the exploitation by some priests who took advantage of the illiteracy and poverty of low caste

people. Again, he could not bear various kinds of superstitions, and the narrowness and bigotry of Hinduism. And he especially hated hypocrisy.

Before Swamiji left for America, a pandit of South India told him: "*Kadāpi na*, don't cross the ocean. You will become an outcaste." But Vivekananda broke all such superstitions. During his youth, his rebellious nature took him to the Brahmo Samaj, a socio-religious reform movement in India. He found that they did not have a caste system, and they had started a programme for women's education. They also emphasized meditation and study, and they were involved in reforming Hinduism. All this he liked. And what was the object of their meditation? Saguna nirakara Brahman -- Brahman without a form but with qualities. This, in particular, suited Narendra, as he did not care for idol worship at all. God with qualities but no form -- that is also the Christian concept of God. Though formless, God is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, almighty, all merciful, all forgiving, all loving, and so on. This idea of God appealed to him.

It is not so easy to change a person like Vivekananda. He was āsishtha, drarishtha, balishtha, medhāvi -- well disciplined, strong in mind, strong in body, and had a gigantic intellect and tremendous will power. He was proud of his learning and scientific reasoning, and was firm in moral, ethical, and spiritual values. And yet this was a man who was going to be changed by a temple priest who had no formal education! It is amazing how Ramakrishna smashed his ego and his pride in his convictions and learning, and finally changed his whole life. How did the Master accomplish this?

First, Narendra did not believe in Sākāra-vād—God with form. But Ramakrishna changed all that. After Narendra’s father died in 1884, the family suffered from poverty and sometimes starved. It was unbearable for Narendranath to see this, as he was then the head of the family. Despite his best efforts, he could not find any job. With no other hope, he came to Ramakrishna and asked him: “Sir, please do something for me. I cannot bear it that my mother, brothers, and sisters are starving at home. The Divine Mother listens to your prayers. Why don’t you pray for me?” Ramakrishna said: “Oh, I prayed to the Mother for you. But She said that you don’t believe in Her, so She cannot do anything for you.”

“Sir, I do not know your Mother.”

“All right! Today is Tuesday, an auspicious day. In the evening you go to the temple and whatever you ask my Mother, She will give it to you.” Naren knew Ramakrishna was “Vāk-Siddha” – perfect in speech. Whatever came from his lips, was true. So that evening he went to the temple. But what did he pray for? He prayed five things: “Mother, give me knowledge, devotion, discrimination, renunciation, and uninterrupted vision of You.” He then returned to the Master and informed him what he had prayed for. Ramakrishna sent him back to the temple and asked him to pray again. Naren again failed. He went three times to the Divine Mother but couldn't ask for money or any worldly things. Finally, Ramakrishna blessed him, saying, “Your family will never suffer from lack of ordinary food and clothing.” It was a great victory for Ramakrishna because Narendra accepted Kali the Mother, God with form. The Master then taught him a song on the Mother which Narendra sang again and again the whole night

and then finally went to sleep. The Master knew that Narendra would carry his message, which was an all-inclusive message. And for this reason Ramakrishna gave him the experience of other paths so that he wouldn't be able to form any sect.

Second, Narendra did not believe in Guru-vād -- the doctrine of the guru. There is no traditional guru in the Brahma Samaj, but it has a preacher similar to a Christian minister. Later on Narendra realized the value of a spiritual teacher. But at first he even criticized Ramakrishna: "Sir, you are illiterate. I have not come here to learn anything from you." The Master jokingly said to the devotees: "Naren bale āmi *nirakshara*, kintu āmār akshar jnāna āchhe -- Naren says I am illiterate but I know the alphabet. I can sign my name." Yet this same Narendra later said to Ramakrishna, "Sir, do you have any medicine that will make me forget everything I have learned?" What a change! About his guru Sri Ramakrishna, he wrote, "Samshaya rākshasa nāsha mahāstram yāmi gurum sharanam bhava-vaidyam naradeva deva jaya jaya naradeva -- I surrender myself to my guru, the physician for the malady of this world, and who is the weapon to destroy the greatest demon one can think of -- that is, doubt!" Rama killed the demon Ravana, Krishna killed the demon Kamsa, and Ramakrishna killed the greatest demon in this age -- that is, doubt. Thus Narendranath accepted Ramakrishna as his guru.

Third, Narendra rejected the Avatara-vād -- the doctrine of the avatara. He did not believe that God incarnates as a human being. One day the Master said to Narendra: "Girish says, I am an avatara. What do you think of it?"

Narendra replied: "Sir, I don't care for such things. But he has faith. Let him believe whatever he likes. If I experience anything myself, then I shall let you know." Later he accepted the Master as an avatara. One night in Cossipore Narendra went to the Master's room and silently questioned whether he was an avatara. The Master immediately removed his doubt, saying, "He who was Rama, he who was Krishna, is verily in this body Ramakrishna." Moreover, at that time Narendra actually saw Rama and Krishna in the Master's body. Later, in his Bhakti Yoga lectures, Swamiji talked elaborately about the guru and the avatara.

Fourth, Advaita-vād -- the doctrine of nondualism. This is a vital point. Narendra did not believe in the philosophy of Advaita. He was a believer in Saguna Brahman, God with qualities. According to him, the creator and the created cannot be the same. It is absurd, he thought, that a table and the creator of the table are the same. He tried to use reason to understand it, but could not. One day he sarcastically remarked to the Master: "It is blasphemous, for there is no difference between such philosophy and atheism. There is no greater sin in the world than to think of oneself as identical with the Creator. I am God, you are God, these created things are God — what can be more absurd! The sages who wrote such things must have been insane." The Master didn't mind Narendra's outspokenness at all. He just smiled and said: "You may not accept the views of these seers. But how can you abuse them or limit God's infinitude? Go on praying to the God of Truth and believe in any aspect of His that He reveals to you."

Another day while chatting with Hazra at Dakshineswar, Narendra again ridiculed the Vedantic experience of oneness: "How can this be? This

jug is God, this cup is God, and we too are God! Nothing can be more preposterous!" When the Master heard Narendra's comment from his room, he came out and said: "Well, what are you talking about?" He then touched Narendra and went into samadhi. This magic touch of Ramakrishna gave Narendra the immediate experience of nondualism and changed him completely. He later attained nirvikalpa samadhi. And it was this nondualistic philosophy that Swamiji preached in the East and the West.

Swamiji once wrote a letter to Mr. Francis Leggett, saying: "When I was young, I was such a puritan that I did not walk on the same sidewalk where there was a movie house. But now I can live in a house of ill-fame. It does not even bother me." Swamiji had changed so much.

Fifth, Janmāntara-vād -- the doctrine of reincarnation. In many of his lectures in the West he mentioned the reasonableness and validity of the theory of reincarnation. In this regard also Ramakrishna changed Narendra. The Master did not force, or intimidate him. He did not argue with him. What did he do? The Master gave him unconditional love, freedom, and experience. Christopher Isherwood remarked: "When a being like Vivekananda is converted, then the whole of the nineteenth century is altered."

Once Sri Ramakrishna predicted: "The day when Naren comes in contact with suffering and misery, the pride of his character will melt into a mood of infinite compassion. His strong faith in himself will be an instrument to reestablish in discouraged souls the confidence and faith they have lost. And the freedom of his conduct based on self-mastery will

shine brightly in the eyes of others as the manifestation of the true liberty of the ego.”

Later Vivekananda admitted: "It is no great matter to control external material powers by some means and to perform miracles. But I have never seen a greater miracle than the way that ‘mad brahmin’ [Sri Ramakrishna] would handle human minds like a lump of clay. He would pound those minds, beat them into shape, develop them, and then with a mere touch he would cast them into a new mould, with new thoughts.”

When Swamiji returned to India, Swami Vijnanananda said, “Swamiji, the Master said that one should renounce woman and gold, but you mixed with so many women in the West.”

“What Sri Ramakrishna told you, you should practice. What Sri Ramakrishna told me, I shall practice! Sri Ramakrishna destroyed any idea of sex or gender in me.” Swamiji saw the Atman in all beings -- men and women. He was a knower of Brahman. And his transformation is vital and extremely important to our spiritual tradition. Vivekananda wanted to be selfish. He wanted to realize Brahman and be immersed in nirvikalpa samadhi. But Sri Ramakrishna told him: “Shame on you! I thought you would be like a huge banyan tree and under your shade people would take rest. And like a selfish person you want your own liberation?” Vivekananda changed. Later he said, “May I be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls -- and above all, my God the wicked, the miserable, the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship.” He became a universal man. We do not see his

physical form anymore, but his spirit has spread all over, flowing in the veins of humanity.

Swamiji is simply a wonder to me. 'Wonder' means that which arouses awe, astonishment, surprise, or admiration. When we gaze at the Great Wonders of the world -- the Great Pyramid of Egypt, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Light House of Alexandria, the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal of India, and the Roman Colosseum of Rome -- we are struck with wonder. Similarly I look at my bookshelf and see the many books by and about Swamiji. I am in wonder as I consider Swamiji's achievements and contributions.

Swami Vivekananda lived in this world for 39 years, 5 months, and 24 days. He started his public work at the age of 30. He worked for about 7 years, and then he said: "I have given enough to thinking humanity for 1500 years." Is this not a wonder? Now it is 2013, and we are observing the 150th anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's birth. Generations to come will also stand in wonder as they observe the depth and magnitude of Vivekananda's life and message.