

Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda was born on January, 12 1863 in Calcutta, Bharat (India). His given name was Narendranath Datta. He was born and brought up in very well educated and cultured family. His father Vishwanath Datta was an attorney of the Calcutta high court and his mother Bhuvneswari Devi was a very religious Hindu woman and devotee to the Hindu god Siva. According to tradition, before Narendra's birth she often had a dream where lord Shiva opened her eyes from deep Samadhi (a highest stage of Yoga where contemplative union) and told her that he would be born as her son. Naren (Swami Vivekananda was called Naren in his childhood) showed his inclination towards spirituality and religion from early childhood.

During his early childhood years he started learning western philosophy and started showing his rebellious nature by not accepting anything without some kind of rational justification or proof. He often questioned stubborn customs and caste based discrimination. His behavior showed natural inclination towards the principles of non-attachments and spiritual unification (See Nikhilananda P 73-75). He was very active in physical as well as musical activities from his childhood. Bhuvneswari Devi, his mother, had a very strong influence in his childhood and early spiritual development. After becoming monk, he often spoke about his mother saying "I am indebted to my mother for the efflorescence of my knowledge" (see Life of Swami Vivekananda 21). In 1871, Narendranath was

Swami Vivekananda

admitted to Metropolitan Institute of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. After studying there for more than five years he passed his Entrance Examination in 1879. He was admitted in to the Presidency college, Calcutta, where he studied logic, European history and philosophy; finally graduating in 1884. Narendra's scholarly attitude was expressed in his professor Dr. Hastie's words "Narendra is really [a] genius. I have traveled far and wide but I have never come across a lad of his talents and possibilities, even in German universities, among philosophical students" (See Dhar P. 53). During those years, Narendra got introduced to the Brahmo Samaj, a community of people who discuss or worship the Eternal and Immutable Supreme Being. Naren often questioned Debendranath Tagor, the senior leader of the Brahmo Samaj about existence of God and never was convinced by any of the answers (See Swami Chetanananda P. 22).

During one of the lectures Prof. Hastie discussed trances and referred to Shree Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar and advised his student to visit him. It was the mystical and yet quite simple answers of Shree Ramakrishna that impressed and shock Narendranath. Naren and his friends visited Dakshineswar to meet Ramakrishna where Naren is reputed to have asked existence of God. Ramakrishan answered very naturally "Yes" and told Naren that he can see God as he can see other people. That shook Naren, as he never expected this kind of answer, especially from the man with such an ordinary appearance. Naren

Swami Vivekananda

started visiting Dakshineswar quite often; it is during this time the transformation from suspicious and rebellious young man to matured man started. Due to Ramakrishna's health (in 1885 he was diagnosed with throat cancer) his disciple moved him to Cossipore village near Calcutta. During this time, Naren often reported experiences of Nirvikalpa Samadhi (see Christopher p.20) and eventually was ordained by Ramakrishna and became Swami Vividishananda; during this time the idea of forming a monastic order of Ramakrishna began to take shape.

After the death of Ramakrishna, all the disciples under the leadership Swami Vivekananda moved to Baranagar near the river Ganga and formed a monastery. In 1888, Swami Vivekananda left the monastery and became wondering monk known as *parivrajaka*, and left with his two favorite books *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Imitation of Christ* (see Dhar P.243), a water pot and a staff. He first visited north India including Nepal and Himalaya. During his visit to Jaipur, Rajputana, he studied Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* (see Romain P 16-25).

Later Vivekananda visited India's south and west, during his travels he studied Vedas and other ancient Hindu scriptures. While in the south, he visited Kanyakumari where he meditated on a piece of Indian rock and received a vision of one India.

Swami Vivekananda

During his Madurai visit he met Bhaskara Setupati, Raja of Ramnad, who later became his devotee and suggested Swamiji to attend Parliament of Religions at Chicago. His devotees in Madras and his other royal devotee sponsored his trip to America. He assumed name of Swami Vivekananda, which was suggested by his disciple Ajitsingh, Maharaja of Khetri [7]. Swamiji left for Chicago on 31 May, 1893 from Bombay and reached to Chicago in July 1893. During his travel, he spoke about Hinduism and harmony of world religion by quoting couple of passages of Bhagavad Gita - "As different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." His speeches during the parliament sessions made a significant impact on the American crowd and media. Almost all the major newspapers of America acknowledged his speeches somehow or other. After the parliament, Vivekananda spent two years lecturing and teaching Vedanta and Yoga. He gathered lots of disciples among few later played a major role in the development of Ramakrishna Mission and Vedanta Society. Prestigious universities such as Harvard and Columbia offered him a chair position of Eastern Philosophy. During his travels, he kept writing encouraging letters to his brother monks and followers in India and eventually they started periodical called Brahmavadin in Chennai, Bharat (India) (see Vincent P 345).

Swami Vivekananda

During his stay in America, Vivekananda visited England in 1895. He gave a series of lectures and drew the attention of many in England. Here he met Margaret Elizabeth Noble, an Irish lady who was in the midst of her learning about the Buddha. Influenced by Vivekananda's teaching she became first Western woman who became a Sanyasin named Bhagini Nivedita. Nivedita helped Vivekananda in establishing one of his goals of lifting up the status of women of India. She played a major role in promoting the rights of women in rural part of India. In November 1898, according to Vivekananda's instruction, she started a school for girls, allowing them to receive a basic education.

Vivekananda went back to India in 1896. On the way he first stopped in England and other European countries, finally traveling to Colombo. On 1st May 1897 Vivekananda started the Ramakrishna Math at Calcutta with idea of religion based on servicing society. Vivekananda started three main *ashramas* at Belur Math, Calcutta, Adwaita Ashram at Mayavati on the foothill of Himalaya near Almora, Uttaranchal and later a third one in Chennai. Adwait Ashrama was one of his favorite places and still is quite popular among the monks of the Ramakrishan Mission.

Despite his declining health, Vivekananda again traveled to England and America with his disciples. At this time he was quite popular among American and English people. During this visit he started the Vedanta Society at San Francisco

Swami Vivekananda

and New York. Vivekananda asked one of his disciples, Swami Abhedananda, to lead the Vedanta Society. One century after its foundation, the Vedanta Ashram has its branches all over the world. He spent almost ten weeks at Ridgely Manor in New York and on the West coast lecturing on spirituality and Eastern Philosophy. From America he went Paris to participate in congress of religions and from Paris he returned back to Bharat (India) in October 1900.

After returning from America Vivekananda went to Mayavati and spent some time in Advaita Ashram and returned back to Belur Math. His health had deteriorated drastically. Vivekananda was suffering from diabetes and asthma and at some point he lost vision of one his eyes. Three days before his death he is reported to have told his disciples about the place where to cremate his body. On Friday, July 4, 1902 he meditated several hours in the morning. He attended prayer and sang devotional songs, walked several miles with a brother monk, swami Premananda, and taught young monks Shukla-Yajur-Veda. Vivekananda then passed away at night. Fulfilling his own prophecy of not living to be forty-years old (See Life of Swami Vivekananda 2 PP. 654-662).

Vivekananda's lectures and teaching are the main source of inspiration to many leaders and youth of India and the world. His teaching influenced scientists like Max Mueller and Nikola Tesla. Once Nehru, The first Prime minister of India,

Swami Vivekananda

said, "Directly or indirectly Swamiji has powerfully influenced the India of today.", which seems quite true even for today's modern India.

Bibliography

Nikhilananda, Swami (April 1964). "Swami Vivekananda Centenary". *Philosophy East and West (University of Hawai'i Press) 14 (1): 73-75*

Life of Swami Vivekananda: By his eastern and western disciples (Sixth ed.). Advaita Ashrama. July 2006

Dhar, Sailendra Nath (1975). *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda*

Isherwood, Christopher (1976). *Meditation and Its Methods According to Swami Vivekananda*. Vedanta Press.

Life and Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, *Adwait Ashram Press*

Biswas, Arun Kumar (1987), *Buddha and Bodhisatva*. Cosmo Publication p19

Swami Chetanananda, *God lived with Them: P.22*

Rolland, Romain. "The Pilgrim of India". The life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel. Pp. 16-25.

Sheean, Vincent (2005). "Forerunners of Gandhi". *Lead, Kindly Light: Gandhi and the Way to Peace*. Kessinger Publishing. P 345

Related Websites

www.wikipedia.com

[www.vedantauk.com/magazine article March4.com](http://www.vedantauk.com/magazine_article_March4.com)

Swami Vivekananda

Related Topics for Further Investigation

Shree Ramakrishna

Parivajraka

Sister Nivedita

Yajur Veda

Nirviklpa Samadhi

Bhuvneswari Devi

Ramakrishna Mission

Vedanta Society

Shanti Ashram

Written by Vivek Trivedi (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.