

**GLIMPSES OF
SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S
HEROIC STRUGGLE**

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*This book is dedicated to
all Western devotees,
past and present*

PREFACE

As “the pilot and guide to needs of the age,” Swami Vivekananda struggled hard to experience the unity of existence, the highest truth of Advaita Vedanta. Throughout his brief dynamic life, he also had to struggle hard in the world. He endured much hardship and suffering while preaching his ideals of our inherent and inalienable divinity and the unity of religions. Swamiji was simultaneously the “conscience of India” and the embodiment of human unity. He had full realization of the spiritual life and deep love for humanity. His inevitable share of human burdens enabled him with inner freedom and outer dynamism and fearlessness. His personal experience convinced him that the practical daily practice of Vedantic principles have the power to redeem us from misfortune and misery.

In the auspicious year of worldwide celebrations honoring Swami Vivekananda’s 150th Birth Anniversary, this booklet is my humble contribution. It is a newly revised edition of the original article, “Swami Vivekananda’s Heroic Struggle,” which was published in serial form in *Vedanta Kesari* (August – November 2012).

It is my fervent hope that these small glimpses of Swamiji’s heroic struggle in life will help readers to gain an insight about the value of a spiritually guided and inspired life.

I wish to express my gratitude to Helen Manolatos.

Om Shri Ramakrishnarpanam astu!

Swami Tathagatananda, November 15, 2012

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GLIMPSES OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S HEROIC STRUGGLE

Suffering is the lot of the world's best and bravest—yet, for aeons yet—till things are righted, if possible, here—at least it is a discipline which breaks the dream [of worldly existence]. In my sane moments I rejoice for my sufferings. Someone must suffer here;—I am glad it is I, amongst others of nature's sacrifices.¹

Come ye that are heavy laden and lay all your burden on me, and then do whatever you like and be happy and forget that I ever existed.²

For the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, great-souled men take their birth; their lives and works are past the ordinary human run, and the method of their preaching is equally marvelous.³

Swami Vivekananda

Prophets and saints suffer for the good of humanity. They bestow love and wisdom to the world. They accept suffering willingly throughout their life for the lasting welfare of humanity. All are exemplars of self-sacrifice and renunciation. They come to remove our suffering. Through their love for us, they show us the way that leads to the end of sorrow. Sri Sankaracharya says:

O Lord, with thy nectar-like speech, sweetened by the enjoyment of the elixir-like bliss of Brahman, pure, cooling to a degree, issuing in streams from thy lips as from a pitcher, and delightful to the ear—do thou sprinkle me who am tormented by worldly afflictions as by the

*tongues of a forest fire. Blessed are those on whom even a passing glance of thy eye lights, accepting them as thine own.*⁴

Swami Vivekananda says, “The purity of these few Paramahamsas is all that holds the world together. If they should all die out and leave it, the world would go to pieces.”⁵ In the *Bhagavad-Gita* Lord Krishna says to Arjuna:

Whatsoever the superior person does, that is also followed by others; What standard he or she demonstrates by action, people follow that.

I have, O Partha, no duty, nothing that I have not gained, and nothing that I have yet to gain, in the three worlds; Yet, I do continue in action.

*If ever I did not continue to work without any relaxation, O Partha Men and women would, in every way follow my example.*⁶

God’s messengers have always been misunderstood, persecuted, and tormented. They suffered more than others did. Swami Vivekananda says:

The great Prophets were giants—they bore a gigantic world on their shoulders. Compared with them we are pygmies, no doubt, yet we are doing the same task; in our little circles, our little homes, we are bearing our little crosses. There is no one so evil, no one so worthless, but he has to bear his own cross. But with all our mistakes, with all our evil thoughts and evil deeds, there is a bright spot somewhere, there is still somewhere the golden thread through which we are always in touch with the divine.⁷

The lives of the prophets testify to the Divine love and truth that transforms people when they go astray. Swami Vivekananda was a world prophet and apostle of *Shakti*, divine strength. He had the great heart of Lord Buddha. He had the penetrating intellect of Sri Sankaracharya. He had Sri Chaitanya’s love for God. He had the burning renunciation of Jesus Christ and the dynamism of St. Paul.

Swami Vivekananda's share of the human struggle made him a truly heroic person.

Swami Vivekananda was a God-man, a great spiritual luminary, a Rishi. He was the Incarnation of Lord Shiva⁸ who was roused by Sri Ramakrishna from his deep samadhi. He took a human form and accepted human suffering for the good of humanity. The Master explained Narendra's profound power of meditation by saying that Narendra was the embodiment of the "Shiva-nature" or "Shiva-power."⁹ We can never grasp his infinite spiritual significance or the fullness of his human personality. His life was perfectly balanced. His universal sympathy for human suffering drew him to others. We are giving some illustrations of his heroic struggle to remove human suffering while he was enduring his own trials and tribulations. We hope these sketches will create a deep impression in the minds of sincere devotees.

Christ says, "If any will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."¹⁰ The cross is our symbol of compassion, forgiveness and universal love that Christ gave us through his crucifixion. Swami Vivekananda's soul was always "hankering after peace and rest eternal undisturbed"¹¹ and longing for the solitary life of a sadhu: "I long, oh! I long for my rags, my shaven head, my sleep under the trees, and my food from begging! India is the only place where, with all its faults, the soul finds its freedom, its God."¹² Swamiji had to experience extreme hardship, humiliation, betrayal, and undergo many other sufferings throughout his life. He bore his cross with love and was the apostle of strength to others. He taught them that they too might experience the glory of the Self that had given him his strength.

Narendra's early experience of poverty. The dire poverty of young Narendranath and his family after his father's death in 1884 is well known. Narendra, still in college and unemployed, was the eldest son. All hope rested on him alone. During this period, he got his first bitter taste of betrayal. His once affectionate relatives

became hostile enemies. They evicted his family from their residence on illegal terms. They deprived his mother of her legitimate possessions and her share of property. For many years, Swamiji had to go to court to defend the legal rights of his family. These lawsuits were expensive and caused him severe financial and emotional difficulties. He was often without food for days at a time. One time he was so famished that he fainted by the roadside. His emotional and psychological suffering more than matched his physical suffering. While his heart burned with the desire to protect his mother and family, his mind longed for God and the contemplative life. He wanted to renounce everything and become a monk. That was his noble ideal. Friends and relatives tried to discourage him and circulated horrible false statements about his character. Then, in 1886, when he was twenty-three years old, his beloved and revered Guru left the mortal coil. This was more than he could bear. Sri Ramakrishna had been the Life of his life and the support of his being. He had been his only friend, consoler and spiritual teacher. Bereft of the Master, all hope left him and he began to doubt himself. The shock severely tested his faith in God and is best described in his own words:

Even before the period of mourning was over I had to go about in search of a job. Starving and barefooted, I wandered from office to office under the scorching noonday sun with an application in hand, one or two intimate friends who sympathized with me in my misfortunes accompanying me sometimes. But everywhere the door was slammed in my face. This first contact with the reality of life convinced me that unselfish sympathy was rare in the world—there was no place in it for the weak, the poor and the destitute. I noticed that those who only a few days before would have been proud to have helped me in any way, now turned their face against me, though they had enough and to spare. Seeing all this, the world sometimes seemed to me to be the handiwork of the devil. One day, weary and footsore, I sat down in the shade of the Ochterlony Monument [the present Shahid Minar] on the Maidan. A friend or two were with me that day or maybe met me there by chance. One of them, I remember distinctly, sang by way of consoling me: “Here blows the

wind, the breath of Brahman, His grace palpable! . . .” It was like a terrible blow on my head. I remembered the helpless condition of my mother and brothers, and exclaimed in bitter anguish and despondency, “Will you please stop that song? Such fancies may be pleasant to those who are born with a silver spoon in their mouth and have no starving relatives at home. Yes, there was a time when I too thought like that. But today, before the hard facts of life, it sounds like grim mockery.”

My friend must have been wounded. How could he fathom the dire misery that had forced these words out of my mouth? Sometimes when I found that there were not provisions enough for the family and my purse was empty, I would pretend to my mother that I had an invitation to dine out and remain practically without food. Out of self-respect I could not disclose the facts to others. My rich friends sometimes requested me to go to their homes or gardens and sing. I had to comply when I could not avoid doing so. I did not feel inclined to express my woes before them nor did they try, themselves, to find out my difficulties. A few among them, sometimes, used to ask me, “Why do you look so pale and weak today?” Only one of them came to know about my poverty, and now and then, unknown to me, sent anonymous help to my mother, by which act of kindness he has put me under a deep debt of gratitude.

Some of my old friends who earned their livelihood by unfair means, asked me to join them. A few among them, who had been compelled to follow this dubious way of life by sudden turns of fortune as in my case, really felt sympathy for me. There were other troubles also. Various temptations came my way. A rich woman sent me an ugly proposal to end my days of penury, which I sternly rejected with scorn. Another woman also made similar overtures to me. I said to her, “You have wasted your life seeking the pleasures of the flesh. The dark shadows of death are before you. Have you done anything to face that? Give up all these filthy desires and remember God!”

In spite of all these troubles, however, I never lost faith in the existence of God or in His divine mercy. Every morning, taking His name, I got up and went out in search of a job. One day my mother overheard me and said bitterly, “Hush, you fool! You have been

crying yourself hoarse for God from your childhood, and what has He done for you?” I was stung to the quick. Doubt crossed my mind. “Does God really exist?” I thought, “And if so, does He really hear the fervent prayer of man? Then why is there no response to my passionate appeals? Why is there so much woe in His benign kingdom? Why does Satan rule in the realm of the Merciful God?” Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar’s words—“If God is good and gracious, why then do millions of people die for want of a few morsels of food at times of famine?”—rang in my ears with bitter irony. I was exceedingly annoyed with God. That was also the most opportune moment for doubt to creep into my heart.

It was ever against my nature to do anything secretly. On the contrary, it was a habit with me from my boyhood not to hide even my thoughts from others through fear or anything else. So it was quite natural for me now to proceed to prove to the world that God was a myth, or that, if he existed, to call upon Him was fruitless. Soon the report gained currency that I was an atheist and did not scruple to drink or even frequent houses of ill fame. This unmerited calumny hardened my heart still more. I openly declared that in this miserable world there was nothing reprehensible in a man who, seeking for a brief respite, should resort to anything; not only that, but that if I was once convinced of the efficacy of such a course, I should not, through fear of anybody, shrink from following it.

A garbled report of the matter soon reached the ears of the Master and his devotees in Calcutta. Some of these came to me for first-hand knowledge of the situation and hinted that they believed some of the rumours at least. A sense of wounded pride filled my heart in finding that they could think me so low. In an exasperated mood I gave them to understand plainly that it was cowardice to believe in God through fear of hell and argued with them as to His existence or non-existence, quoting several Western philosophers in support. The result was that they took leave of me convinced that I was hopelessly lost—and I was glad. When I thought that perhaps Shri Ramakrishna also would believe that, I was deeply wounded at heart. “Never mind,” I said to myself, “if the good or bad opinion of a man rests upon such flimsy foundations, I don’t care.” And I was amazed to hear later that the Master had, at first, received the report coldly,

without expressing an opinion one way or the other. But when one of his favourite disciples, Bhavanath, said to him with tears in his eyes, “Sir, I could not even dream that Narendra could stoop so low,” he was furious and said, “Hush you fool! The Mother has told me that it can never be so. I shan’t be able to look at you if you speak to me like that again.”

But not withstanding these forced atheistic views, the vivid memory of the divine visions I had experienced since my boyhood, and especially since my contact with Shri Ramakrishna, would lead me to think that God must exist and that there must be some way to realize Him. Otherwise life would be meaningless. In the midst of all these troubles and tribulations I must find that way. Days passed and the mind continued to waver between doubt and uncertainty. My pecuniary needs also remained just the same.¹³

Narendra’s hardships at Baranagore. Just before his *Mahasamadhi* on 16 August 1886 at Cossipore, the Master had transmitted his power to Narendra. This profound power was working within Narendra to make him a fit instrument for creating a new epoch. He established the basic form of the Ramakrishna Math in a rented building at Baranagore on 19 October 1886. He later wrote, “When my Master left the body, we were a dozen penniless and unknown young men. Against us were a hundred powerful organizations, struggling hard to nip us in the bud.¹⁴ During his lecture, “My Life and Mission,” in Pasadena, California in 1900, he spoke of the physical, emotional and psychological hardships of those days:

We had no friends. Who would listen to a few boys, with their crank notions? Nobody. At least, in India, boys are nobodies. Just think of it—a dozen boys, telling people vast, big ideas, saying they are determined to work these ideas out in life. Why, everybody laughed. From laughter, it became serious; it became persecution. . . . And thus we went on, that band of boys. The only thing we got from those around us a kick and a curse—that was all. Of course, we had to beg from door to door for our food: got hips and haws—the refuse of everything—a piece of bread here and there. We got hold of a

broken-down old house, with hissing cobras living underneath; and because that was the cheapest, we went into that house and lived there. . . . I believed, as I was living, that these ideas [life-transforming ideas of Sri Ramakrishna] were going to rationalize India and bring better days to many lands and foreign races. With that belief, came the realization that it is better that a few persons suffer than that such ideas should die out of the world. What if a mother or two brothers die? It is a sacrifice. Let it be done. No great thing can be done without sacrifice. The heart must be plucked out and the bleeding heart placed upon the altar. Then great things are done. Is there any other way? None have found it. . . .¹⁵

Sri Ramakrishna's young disciples needed to succeed as a brotherhood with a clear mission. Narendra, as their leader, bore this heavy responsibility alone while also looking after his family. Narendra suffered mental agony at Baranagore:

I had to stand between my two worlds. On the one hand, I would have to see my mother and brothers starve unto death; on the other, I had believed that this man's [Sri Ramakrishna] ideas were for the good of India and the world, and had to be preached and worked out. And so the fight went on in my mind for days and months. Sometimes I would pray for five or six days and nights together without stopping. Oh, the agony of those days! I was living in hell! The natural affections of my boy's heart drawing me to my family—I could not bear to see those who were the nearest and dearest to me suffering. On the other hand, nobody to sympathize with me. Who would sympathize with the imaginations of a boy—imagination that caused so much suffering to others? Who would sympathize with me? None—except one. . . . [Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi] was the only one who sympathized . . . but she was powerless . . . Oh, how much it has cost! What agony! What torture! What terrible suffering is behind every deed of success in every life!¹⁶

After practicing hard austerities, Narendra acted on his innermost resolve. In December 1886, at the home of Matangini Devi in Antpur,¹⁷ he took the vow of renunciation on Christmas Eve along with the other disciples who were living at Baranagore.

A serious conflict troubled his mind. Before the Master's death, he had experienced *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* by his grace but Sri Ramakrishna had denied him further experiences of that state. Still, he longed to go to a solitary place in the Himalayas and remain absorbed in the Absolute. This desire would not leave him. During this period of mental turmoil, Balaram Bose and Surendra Mitra, the two main householders who supported the Baranagore Math, died.

Swami Vivekananda's hardships as a wandering monk. Between 1890 and 1893, Swamiji wandered as a monk throughout the length and breadth of India. He encountered great hardships along the way, with his "health breaking all the time":

It tells on the body in the long run: sometimes one meal at nine in the evening, another time a meal at eight in the morning, another after two days, another after three days—and always the poorest and roughest thing. Who is going to give the beggar the good things he has? And then, they have not much in India. And most of the time walking, climbing snow peaks, sometimes ten miles of hard mountain climbing, just to get a meal. They eat unleavened bread in India, and sometimes they have it stored away for twenty or thirty days, until it is harder than bricks; and then they will give a square of that. I would have to go from house to house to collect sufficient for one meal. And then, the bread was so hard, it made my mouth bleed to eat it. Literally, you can break your teeth on that bread. Then I would put it in a pot and pour water over it from the river. For months and months I existed that way—of course it was telling on the health.¹⁸

Several times, Swami Vivekananda became seriously ill due to starvation and severe cold. Once in Almora, a single cucumber offered to him by a Muslim farmer energized him. Another time when Swamiji was ministering to the needs of the local people in Khetri, he completely forgot to eat or drink water for three days.

The most serious illness attacked him when he was in Hrishikesh with a few of his brother-monks towards the end of 1890. It turned out to be a great blessing. A dangerously high fever and diphtheria had lowered his pulse. In the bitter cold, he fell down unconscious but gradually recovered. Later, he told his brother monks that “during that apparently unconscious state, he had seen that he had a particular mission in the world to fulfill and that until he had accomplished that mission, he would have no rest. Indeed, his brother-disciples noticed such a superabundant spiritual energy welling up in him that it seemed that he could hardly contain it. He was restless to find a proper field for its expression.”¹⁹ The vision ended his desire for intense *sadhana* in the Himalayas.

Swami Vivekananda's mission is born. Suffering inspires a sense of mission in great souls. Swamiji's personal sufferings never overwhelmed him. The suffering of others inspired him to action. The shock of his sister Jogendrabala's suicide in 1891 turned his mind to the plight of women in India. The tragic condition of India's impoverished masses was much harder for him to bear. It haunted him constantly, pained his heart and made him restless with sorrow. He was always thinking of ways to help them. Their wretched condition and hopeless future dominated his mind. He wrote to a brother disciple, “I am going about taking food at others' houses shamelessly and without the least compunction, like a crow.” Swamiji stopped begging from the poor for his own survival. On some days, he vowed never to ask for food and to eat only what came to him. Once, he nearly died for lack of nourishment while passing through a forest for many hours without food and water. He fell exhausted to the ground. He set aside all his thoughts and fixed his mind on God. He remained in this concentrated state. As darkness fell, he saw a tiger approaching. It looked at him, settled on its haunches and did not come any closer. Resigning himself to his fate, he thought, “Ah! This is right; both of us are hungry. After all, this body has not been the means of the absolute realisation. Therefore by it no good to the world will possibly be done. It is well and desirable that it should be of

service at least to this hungry beast.”²⁰ The tiger sauntered away and Swamiji spent the remainder of the night in deep meditation. At dawn, he felt himself suffused with great power.

By 1893, Swamiji was convinced that he must go to the West and shared this idea with others in Madras: “The time has come for the propagation of our faith . . . for the Hinduism of the Rishis to become dynamic . . . In order to rise again, India must be strong and united, and must focus all its living forces.”²¹ Without any effort on his part, money was donated for him to go to the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Still, Swamiji felt uneasy and wanted a sign from the Mother to be certain he was not just “following his own will” or “being carried away by enthusiasm.”²² He earnestly prayed to Mother: “O Mother, show me Thy will! It is Thou Who art the Doer. Let me be only Thy instrument.”²³

In the midst of his agony of waiting for a sign from the Mother, Swamiji had to endure certain betrayals of those who had promised to support his efforts in the West. One wealthy gentleman refused to give even a pie. Then, from Swami Shivananda’s reminiscences, it is learned that the Raja of Ramnad, who had encouraged Swamiji to go to the Parliament and pledged Rs, 10,000 (which Swamiji rejected at the time), later changed his mind. The Raja feared that Swamiji might get involved in politics, which would work against the Raja’s own intentions. When the Raja was approached through a letter from Swamiji’s Madras disciples to fulfill his pledge, he wrote back, “I am unable to send any money for this purpose.”²⁴ The Raja’s rejection augured ill for Swamiji’s mission and was a devastating blow to him; Swamiji had placed his hope in the Raja’s support for his journey to America. In February 1893, a day after arriving in Hyderabad, Swamiji wrote in part to Alasinga Perumal:

So all my plans have been dashed to the ground. That is why I wanted to hurry off from Madras in the beginning. In that case I would have months left in my hands to seek out for somebody

amongst our northern princes to send me over to America. But alas, it is now too late. First, I cannot wander about in this heat—I would die. Secondly, my fast friends in Rajputana would keep me bound down to their sides if they get hold of me and would not let me go over to Europe. So my plan was to get hold of some new person without my friends' knowledge. But this delay at Madras has dashed all my hopes to the ground, and with a deep sigh I give it up, and the Lord's will be done! It is my "Praktana" [fate]; nobody to blame. . . . "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, for Thine is the glory and the kingdom for ever and ever."²⁵

Swamiji's many encounters with India's poor gave positive reinforcement to the vision he had had in Hrishikesh about his future mission. With unsurpassed sympathy for the suffering of India's masses, Swamiji ended his life of wandering as a monk. On 20 August 1893, he wrote to Alasinga Perumal, "I have travelled twelve years with this load in my heart and this idea in my head. I have gone from door to door of the so-called rich and great. With a bleeding heart I have crossed half the world to this strange land, seeking for help."²⁶ Swamiji revealed many of his hardships in this letter: "All those rosy ideas we had before starting have melted, and I have now fight against many impossibilities. . . . Starvation, cold, hooting in the streets on account of my quaint dress, these are what I have to fight against. But, my dear boy, no great things were ever done without great labour."²⁷ The same day, Swamiji sent Alasinga a cable that read, "Starving. All money spent. Send money to return at least."²⁸ Swamiji's compassion was fully aroused. He felt compelled both to find a way to help the poor of India and to continue leading the Brotherhood for that purpose.

The other side of success in America. To raise money and help India's "sunken millions" to "have a better piece of bread and a better piece of rag on their bodies," he went to America.²⁹ Swamiji had to face many trials and suffer many indignities from the first day of his arrival in the West. On July 25, 1893, his steamship, the

Empress of India, docked at Vancouver. Swamiji froze to the bone. The clothing his friends had given him was not suitable to the bitter cold of the Pacific Northwest. The next morning, he travelled by rail, changing trains three times along the way to reach Chicago, where he would attend the World Parliament of Religions as a delegate. He was alone in a foreign land, nearly penniless and unaided. He arrived in Chicago five weeks before the opening of the Parliament, “burdened with unaccustomed possessions, not knowing where to go, conspicuous because of his strange attire, annoyed by the lads who ran after him in amusement, weary and confused by the exorbitant charges of the porters, bewildered by the crowds.”³⁰ The worldliness and materialism that he saw everywhere shocked him.

The Parliament’s authorities required all delegates to produce credentials. Professor John Henry Wright of Harvard University had given him the address of the Chairman of the Parliament Committee. He had also given him letters of introduction to the committees responsible for housing and provisions for the Oriental delegates. Unfortunately, Swamiji had misplaced the address. That night, tired and exhausted, he fell asleep in an empty boxcar in a railway freight yard. The Parliament had not yet begun and Americans had yet to learn who Swami Vivekananda was. He always remained a true Sannyasin. The following morning, in the German quarter, he went to the wealthy neighborhood of Lake Shore Drive to beg for food, in the same manner as in India. He also hoped to get the directions to the Parliament. At every door, the servants who answered his knock mistook him for a vagabond. They rejected him and treated him rudely. On the street, men looked at his foreign dress and mocked him. Swamiji did not write about these things to Alasinga. Cold, exhausted by hunger and anxious about whether the Parliament would accept him as a delegate, he sank down on a park bench and resigned himself to God’s will. The rest is history.

The honor and world fame that Swamiji's purity and spiritual stature earned him from his very first address on September 11, 1893 predicted his future. From that day on there was only ceaseless labor for him. The terrific demands on every level of his being, continued until the end of his life. On that day, he lost the dearest treasure of a man of renunciation: peace and quietude. His magnificent success did not make him feel at all triumphant. He stayed alone in his room that night thinking about India's poor and weeping bitterly:

As he retired the first night and lay upon his bed, the terrible contrast between poverty-stricken India and opulent America oppressed him. He could not sleep for pondering over India's plight. The bed of down seemed to be a bed of thorns. The pillow was wet with his tears. He went to the window and gazed out into the darkness until he was well-nigh faint with sorrow. At length, overcome with emotion, he fell to the floor, crying out, "O Mother, what do I care for name and fame when my motherland remains sunk in utmost poverty? To what a sad pass have we poor Indians come when millions of us die for want of a handful of rice, and here they spend millions of rupees upon their personal comforts! Who will raise the masses in India! Who will give them bread? Show me, O Mother, how I can help them!"³¹

He had been bold and fearless at the Parliament as never before that event—full of faith in himself and his mission of helping his people. He was an unassailable messenger of truth. The days with his brother monks at the Baranagore Math had strengthened his faith:

A thousand times despondency came; but there was one thing always to keep us hopeful—the tremendous love between us. I have got a hundred men and women around me; if I become the devil himself tomorrow, they will say, "here we are still! We will never give you up!" That is a great blessing. In happiness, in misery, in famine, in pain, in the grave, in heaven, or in hell who never gives me up is my friend. Is such friendship a joke? A man may have salvation

through such friendship. That brings salvation if we can love like that. If we have that faithfulness, why, there is the essence of all concentration. You need not worship any gods in the world if you have that faith, that strength, that love. And that was there with us all throughout that hard time. . . . If you really want the good of others, the whole universe may stand against you and cannot hurt you. It must crumble before your power of the Lord in you if you are sincere and really unselfish.³²

In January 1895, Swamiji organized the headquarters of The Vedanta Society of New York at 54 West 33rd Street. In those days, it was not a good neighborhood and he had to put up with many difficulties on this account. Leon Landsberg (Swami Kripananda) had rented one room at this location for Swamiji and shared it with him for a few months, while contributing some practical assistance. From Sister Devamata's account, the residence was "one in a long, monotonous row of dingy boarding houses," which to the Swami was "very dirty and miserable." Swamiji's room had no private bath or kitchen and proved very inconvenient. It was very uncomfortable—less than twenty feet wide and sparsely furnished. He had to meditate, work, eat, sleep and cook (on a stove donated by a friend) in the same room. They had to share the community kitchen on the ground floor and the common bathroom above with everyone. Occasionally, he and Mr. Landsberg would buy a light supper at a cheap restaurant nearby. Swamiji generally did the cooking and Landsberg had to wash many pots and pans, much to his irritation.

On 28 January, Swamiji began teaching Vedanta classes at the Society, in private homes and at public forums. His classes on the four Yogas and the *Bhagavad-Gita* were held "every morning, from 11 till one o'clock and often till later" in his room, "free as air." The spiritual treasures given freely to all by the great Prophet were appreciated but not greatly valued. The donations dropped into the basket that hung near the door of the classroom did not even cover the basic expenses. The lack of funds prevented

Swamiji from moving to a better location and he continued to work hard in his small room on the second floor. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Swamiji was immensely happy and poured his mind, heart and soul into his new mission. A little more than two weeks after moving to this location, Swamiji wrote to Mrs. Bull on 14 February, "I am very happy now. Between Mr. Landsberg and me, we cook some rice and lentils or barley and quietly eat it, and write something or read or receive visits from poor people who want to learn something, and thus I feel I am more a Sannyasin now than I ever was in America."³³ "Long before [June]," Sara Ellen Waldo wrote, "they had outgrown their small beginnings and had removed downstairs to occupy an entire parlour floor and extension."³⁴

The extraordinary load of work, however, shattered his health. In February 1895, Swamiji wrote about the hardships of the Eastern tour of lectures: "In order to give lectures, I had often to make my way through snow-covered mountains in the terribly severe winters and had to travel even up to one or two o'clock at night."³⁵ In his lecture, "Swami Vivekananda and His Work," Swami Abhedananda writes, "Sometimes he would be invited by people living in different cities hundreds of miles apart to give public addresses on the same day and he would accept in every case, travelling for hours by train or by any available conveyance."³⁶ In mid-April, he was forced to take rest at Ridgely Manor, the estate of Mr. Francis Leggett, the future president of the Vedanta Society of New York. Ten days' rest at the placid retreat on the Hudson River, 80 miles north of New York City, renewed his spirit. "I am to create a new order of humanity," he wrote to Alasinga Perumal that May.³⁷ Eight days later, he was still in a confident mood and wrote to Alasinga, "Now I have got a hold on New York, and I hope to get a permanent body of workers who will carry on the work when I leave the country . . . *Men* are more valuable than all the wealth of the world."³⁸ May had not passed when Swamiji had to face insurmountable financial difficulties and the unexpected departure of Leon Landsberg. He now had to do nearly everything alone to maintain his "household." His mood changed. He wrote

to Mrs. Bull, “The classes are going on; but I am sorry to say, though the attendance is large, it does not even pay enough to cover the rent. I will try this week and then give up.”³⁹ In June he wrote to Mary Hale, “Landsberg has gone away to live in some other place, so I am left alone. I am living mostly on nuts, fruits and milk.”⁴⁰ His health quickly deteriorated again and he felt himself wearing out. His “nerves were wracked, his brain tired, his whole body overtaxed. He longed for a brief period of rest and recuperation.”⁴¹

Swamiji knew that corresponding adversity and suffering accompany life’s joys and satisfaction. In September 1899, he wrote to Mr. E. T. Sturdy:

I am always in the midst of ebbs and flows. I knew it always and preached always that every bit of pleasure will bring its quota of pain, if not with compound interest. I have a good deal of love given to me by the world; I deserve a good deal of hatred therefore. I am glad it is so—as it proves my theory of “every wave having its corresponding dip” on my own person.

As for me, I stick to my nature and my principle—once a friend, always a friend—also the true Indian principle of looking subjectively for the cause of the objective.⁴²

In fact, his faithful friend Mr. Sturdy had come under the influence of people who were hostile to Swamiji and his noble mission in the West. Sturdy lost his faith in Swamiji. He sent Swamiji a long letter with harsh and unjust accusations against him. Swamiji, however, continued to bless him and accepted this misfortune as part of his own karma. His letter to Mr. Sturdy in November 1899 is not given in its entirety. It reveals the spiritual strength with which Swamiji silently endured this injustice:

My Dear Sturdy,

This is not to defend my conduct. Words cannot wipe off the evils I have done, nor can any censor stop from working the good deeds, if any.

For the last few months I have been hearing so much of the luxuries I was given to enjoy by the people of the West—luxuries which the hypocrite myself has been enjoying, although preaching renunciation all the while; luxuries, the enjoyment of which has been the great stumbling-block in my way, in England at least. I nearly hypnotized myself into the belief that there has at least been a little oasis in the dreary desert of my life, a little spot of light in one whole life of misery and gloom, one moment of relaxation in a life of hard work and harder curses—even that oasis, that spot, that moment was only one of sense-enjoyment!!

I was glad, I blessed a hundred times a day those that had helped me to get it, when, lo, your last letter comes like a thunderclap, and the dream is vanished. I begin to disbelieve your criticism—have little faith left in all this talk of *luxuries* and enjoyments, and other visions memory calls up. These I state. Hope you will send it round to friends, if you think fit, and correct me where I am wrong.

I remember your place at Reading, where I was fed with boiled cabbage and potatoes and boiled rice and boiled lentils, three times a day . . . [I do not] remember myself as complaining . . . *though I lived as a thief*, shaking through fear all the time, and working every day for you . . . [and] of the house on St. George's Road . . . My poor brother was ill there and . . . drove him away. There too, I don't remember to have had any luxuries as to food or drink or bed or even *the room given to me*. . . . The next was Miss Müller's place. Though she has been very kind to me, I was living on fruits and nuts. . . . [and] the black hole of London where I had to work almost day and night and cook the meals oft-times for five or six, and most nights with a bite of bread and butter. . . . With the exception of Capt. and Mrs. Sevier, I do not remember even one piece of rag as big as a handkerchief I got from England. On the other hand, the incessant demand on my body and mind in England is the cause of my breakdown in health. This was all you English people gave me, whilst working me to death, and now I am cursed for the luxuries I lived in!! Whosoever of you has given me a coat? Whosoever a cigar? Whosoever a bit of fish or flesh? Whosoever of you, I dare say, I asked food or drink or smoke or dress or money from you?

Ask, Sturdy, as for God's sake, ask your friends, and first ask your own "God within who never sleeps."

You have given me money for my work. Every penny of it is there. Before your eyes, I sent my brother away, perhaps to his death; and I would not give him a farthing of the money, which was not my private property. . . . On the other hand, I remember in England Capt. and Mrs. Sevier . . . [who] never cursed me for my luxuries, though they are ready to give me luxuries, if I need or wish.

I need not tell you of Mrs. Bull, Miss MacLeod, Mr. and Mrs. Leggett. You know their love and kindness for me, and Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod have been to our country, have lived and moved with us as no foreigner ever did, roughing it all, and they do not ever curse me and my luxuries either . . . and these were the people whose bread I was eating, whose clothes were covering my back, whose money bought my smokes and several times paid my rent, whilst I was killing myself for your people, when you were taking *my pound of flesh* for the dirty hole and starvation and reserving all this accusation of luxury.

"The clouds of autumn make great noise but send no rain;
The clouds of the rainy season without a word flood the earth."

See Sturdy, those that have helped or are still helping have no criticism no curses: it is only those who do nothing, who come only to grind their own axes, that curse, that criticize. That such worthless, heartless, selfish, rubbish criticize, is the greatest blessing that can come to me. . . . Take these critics up one after the other—it is all flesh, all flesh and no spirit anywhere. Thank God, they come out sooner or later in their true colours. And you advise me to regulate my conduct, my work, according to the desires of such heartless, selfish persons, and are at your wit's end because I do not!
. . .

Well, Sturdy, my heart aches. I understand it all. I know what you are in—you are in the clutches of people who want to use you . . . But, my poor boy, you have got the flesh smell—a little money—and vultures are around. Such is life.

You said a lot about ancient India. That India still lives, is not dead, and that living India dares even today to deliver her message without fear or favour of the rich, without fear of anybody's opinion, either in the land where her feet are in chains or in the very face of those who hold the end of the chain, her rulers. That India still lives. . . . – India of undying love, of everlasting faithfulness, the unchangeable, not only in manners and customs, but also in love, in faith, in friendship. And I, the least of that India's children, love you, Sturdy, with *Indian* love, and would any day give up a thousand bodies to help you out of this delusion.

Ever yours,
Vivekananda⁴³

During his lectures, Swamiji tried to remove ignorance, superstitious beliefs and prejudice in the minds of his listeners. Powerful enemies, so-called rationalists, scholarly western philosophers, atheists, materialists and the like often came to his lectures. Jealous missionaries and Christian extremists feared his profound influence on the minds of Christians. Openly, shamelessly, they expressed their malice. Their false accusations even infected the minds of some of the Indian delegates at the Parliament. Brahma leader Pratap Chandra Mazoomdar envied Swamiji's personal success at the Parliament. He kept up a long campaign of harsh slander against Swamiji's character and roused many Bengalis to his cause. Swamiji ignored the false charges against him in America and India. He was indifferent to the praises simultaneously heaped upon him in America. In 1894, he had written to Miss Isabelle McKindley from New York:

Now I do not care what they even of my own people say about me (referring to Mazoomdar and others who agreed with him)—except for one thing. I have an old mother. She has suffered much all her life and in the midst of all she could bear to give me up for the service of God and man; but to have given up the most beloved of her children—her hope—to live a beastly immoral life in a far distant

country, as Mazoomdar was telling in Calcutta, would have simply killed her. But the Lord is great, none can injure His children.⁴⁴

Preaching in the States had been no easy matter for Swamiji. Americans had given him a mixed reception. Great open-minded thinkers and scientists of his time praised him. Dogmatic, mean-spirited and prejudiced people condemned him. Others with staked interests gave him a hard time. To make matters worse, Swamiji was well aware of the potential threat to his life in the West. He wrote, "It struck me more than once that I should have to leave my bones on foreign shores, owing to the prevalence of religious intolerance."⁴⁵ By one account, during a dinner in Detroit there had been an attempt to kill him by poisoning his coffee. As he raised the cup to his lips, he suddenly had a vision of Shri Ramakrishna standing alongside him and saying, "Do not drink—it is poisoned."⁴⁶ In the West, Swamiji had faced several other close encounters with death with great courage and strength. In England, when a stampeding bull chased him and his party, a woman fell while trying to escape. Swamiji confronted the charging bull in an effort to protect her, whereupon the bull stopped in its tracks! Another time in the Alps, he barely escaped falling from a rock face to his death.

Swamiji's spiritual attitude toward nationalism. Swami Vivekananda's nationalistic fervor was uniquely passionate and powerful. Only those nearest to him in spirit could understand it. When Swamiji returned from his first visit to America, Swami Turiyananda went to see him in Calcutta at Balaram Mandir and described it perfectly:

I found him pacing the verandah like a caged lion. He was deep in thought and did not notice my presence. . . . He began to hum under his breath a celebrated song of Mirabai. And the tears welled up in his eyes. He stopped and leaned against the railing, and hid his face in his two palms. His voice became more distinct and he sang, repeating several times:

“Oh, nobody understands my sorrow!” And again, “Only he who suffers knows the anguish of sorrow!” . . . His voice pierced me through and through like an arrow. I could not understand the cause of his affliction. . . . Then suddenly I understood. It was his rending sympathy which made him often shed tears of burning blood. And the world would never have known it. . . .”

Do you think that these tears of blood were shed in vain? No! Each one of those tears, shed for his country, every inflamed whisper of his mighty heart will give birth to troops of heroes, who will shake the world with their thoughts and their deeds.⁴⁷

Swamiji’s agony for India calls forth the grace of the Divine Mother. Numerous worries and setbacks greatly troubled Swamiji’s mind and health. Two things about the Baranagore Math caused him much anxiety: the uncertain financial support of his brother-disciples and the administration of the Math. In addition, he lost two dedicated workers. His disciple E. T. Sturdy and Miss Henrietta Mueller betrayed his trust and abandoned him. The two disciples that Swamiji had initiated into sannyasa at Thousand Island Park in 1895, Leon Landsberg (Swami Kripananda) and Mme. Marie Louise (Swami Abhayananda) turned against him, despite receiving his blessing and his authorization to teach. “We have no organization, nor do we want to build any. Each one is quite independent to teach, quite free to preach whatever he or she likes. If you have the spirit within, you will never fail to attract others. . . . Individuality is my motto, I have no ambition beyond training individuals up,” he had written in a letter to Swami Abhayananda in late 1895.⁴⁸ Swami Kripananda defected in 1898. Neither had succeeded in attracting new members and neither served his cause as he had hoped. The mission in America, Swamiji concluded with disappointment, “would have to be carried on by Indians.”⁴⁹

His health was poor and the environment was hostile. His agonies came to a climax in the second week of September 1898. The

Divine Mother had given him all his strength. Now, he meditated deeply upon the darker and painful side of life, upon Death. He experienced Mother Kali in Her inscrutable horrific aspect and was granted Her vision. That experience shook his body and mind to the core. Swamiji said, “That which Sri Ramakrishna called “Kali,” took possession of my body and soul That makes me work and work, and never lets me keep still or look to my personal comfort.”⁵⁰

Swamiji endures the slow response to his mission. The two years Swamiji spent in India between his first two visits to the West were “specially bad,” he wrote to Miss Mary Hale in 1900. He continued, “I have been living in mental hell . . . I never know a moment’s peaceful life. It has always been high pressure, mentally.”⁵¹ Firstly, despite his hard work, the Indian people were not adequately responding to his clarion call to action. This was partly due to the opposing influence of orthodox Brahmins, the Brahmo Samaj, Theosophists, and Christian missionaries. Secondly, his brother disciples also were slow to accept his mission. Tearfully, he said to his brother disciple Swami Turiyananda, “Dear Haribhai, can’t you see me laying down my life inch by inch in fulfilling this mission of my Master till I have come to the verge of death? Can you look on without helping by relieving me of a part of my great burden?”⁵²

Swamiji’s remedy for suffering. During his second visit to America, Swamiji sometimes mentioned his difficulties to his American disciples when writing to them about other matters:

Some days I feel I can bear everything and suffer everything . . . Then again, I am afraid. . . . I can always work better alone, and am physically and mentally best when entirely alone! I scarcely had a day’s illness during my eight years of lone life away from my brethren. Now I am getting up, being alone. Strange, but that is what Mother wants me to be. “Wandering alone like the rhinoceros .

”⁵³

I have lost many, suffered much . . . “I was in the glare, burning and panting all the time . . . My life is made up of blows like that, and hundred times worse, because of poverty, treachery, and my own foolishness!”⁵⁴

Swamiji rarely spoke about his “jarring and clashing life”⁵⁵ to others. On 5 January 1900, he made an exception. He was speaking to a spellbound audience in Los Angeles, California. His lecture, “The Open Secret,” was about man’s essential divinity and the means of attaining it. He said that it is our duty and innate human right to assert our divine heritage in the midst of our troubles and misery. We are miserable because we are ignorant about the glory of the Self or *Atman*. Swamiji said:

Many times I have been in the jaws of death, starving, footsore, and weary; for days and days I had no food, and often could walk no farther; I would sink down under a tree, and life would seem ebbing away. I could not speak, I could scarcely think, but at last the mind reverted to one idea: “I have no fear nor death; I never hunger nor thirst. I am It! I am It! The whole of nature cannot crush me; it is my servant. Assert thy strength, thou Lord of Lords and God of gods! Regain thy lost empire! Arise and walk and stop not!” And I would rise up, reinvigorated, and here am I, living, today.⁵⁶

With these words, Swamiji vindicated his earlier statement of fearlessness, strength and faith made to his countrymen during his lectures from Colombo to Almora in 1897:

Awake, Awake, Awake from this hypnotism of weakness. None is really weak; the soul is infinite, omnipotent and omniscient. Stand up, assert yourself, proclaim the God within you, do not deny Him! Too much of inactivity, too much of weakness, too much of hypnotism has been and is upon our race. O ye modern Hindus, de-hypnotize yourselves. The way to do that is in your own sacred books. Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul, and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that

is excellent will come when the sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.⁵⁷

Whenever Swamiji spoke of strength, it was exhilarating. Hearing him, others were filled with new hope and courage. “Strength” was the core and kernel, the secret, of his heroic life.

Swamiji’s inspired sense of duty knew no obstacle. He left America the second time on 26 July 1900 and eventually returned to India in shattered health. He had diabetes, dropsy and asthma, and the sight in his right eye almost gone. In spite of suffering from these conditions for the remainder of his life, he never abandoned any duty that he considered sacred. No obstacle could hinder him.

His explanation of the contrasting elements of his life. Swamiji traced his suffering and mistakes to his emotional nature. Once, he indicated that this was the cause of his checkered life:

There are two sorts of persons in the world. The one—strong-nerved, quiet, yielding to nature, not given to much imagination, yet good, kind, sweet, etc., . . . they alone are born to be happy. There are others again with high-strung nerves, tremendously imaginative, with intense feeling . . . For them there is no happiness. . . . [They] will have to run between ecstasy and misery.⁵⁸

My mistakes have been great, but every one of them was from too much love. How I hate *love*! Would I never had any Bhakti! . . . The peace, the quiet I am seeking, I never found. I went years ago to the Himalayas, [with the intention] never to come back; and my sister committed suicide, the news reached me there, and that weak heart flung me off from that prospect of peace! It is the weak heart that has driven me out of India to seek some help for those I love, and here I am! Peace I have sought, but the heart, that seat of Bhakti, would not allow me to find it. Struggle and torture, torture and struggle!⁵⁹

His longing for solitude is spiritually fulfilled. Swamiji's inner peace did not depend on human affection or friendship. He attuned himself to the living, eternal Truth. He wished always to draw nearer to that Truth through renunciation. He wanted to forego all human companionship and consolation and remain a *Sannyasin* in solitude. Recognizing the futility of this wish, he mentally renounced that desire. In March 1900, he wrote to Miss Mary Hale:

My health is so-so, but my mind is very peaceful and has been for some time. I am trying to give up all anxiety unto the Lord. I am only a worker. My mission is to obey and work. He knows the rest. "Giving up all vexations and paths, do thou take refuge unto Me. I will save you from all dangers" (*B. Gita*, XVIII: 66). I am trying hard to realise that. May I be able to do it soon.⁶⁰

The world did not beguile Swamiji. Still, it was hard for him to quit yearning for an end to his travels and teachings. Ten days later, he wrote again to Miss Mary Hale:

As for me, I am tired on the other hand, of eternal tramping; that is why I want to go back home and be quiet. I do not want to work anymore. My nature is the retirement of a scholar. I never get it! I pray I will get it, now that I am all broken and worked out. Whenever I get a letter from Mrs. Sevier from her Himalayan home, I feel like flying off to the Himalayas. I am really sick of this platform work and eternal trudging and seeing new faces and lecturing.⁶¹

Swamiji easily endured his share of emotional suffering. He carried the will of his Master in his heart. He offered all his actions, thoughts and feelings as his devout adoration, worship, love and dedication to Sri Ramakrishna. Therefore, his cross made him a Man of Joy, not a "Man of Sorrows." Six days later, he sent another letter to Miss Mary Hale that shows he had gone beyond all intellectual understanding. He had found the peace of the Self of Advaita Vedanta:

This is to let you know “I am very happy.” Not that I am getting into a shadowy optimism, but my power of suffering is increasing. I am being lifted up above the pestilential miasma of this world’s joys and sorrows; they are losing their meaning. It is a land of dreams; it does not matter whether one enjoys or weeps; they are but dreams, and as such, must break sooner or later. . . . I am attaining peace that passeth understanding, which is neither joy nor sorrow, but something above them both . . . My passing through the valley of death, physical, mental, last two years, has helped me in this. Now I am nearing that *Peace*, the eternal silence. Now I mean to see things as they are, everything in that peace, perfect in its way. “He whose joy is only in himself, whose desires are only in himself, he has *learned* his lessons.” This is the great lesson that we are here to learn through myriads of births and heavens and hells—that there is nothing to be asked for, desired for, beyond one’s Self. “The greatest thing I can obtain is my Self.” “I am free,” therefore, I require none else for my happiness. “Alone through eternity, because I was free, am free, and will remain free forever.” This is Vedantism. I preached the theory so long, but oh, joy! Mary, my dear sister, I am realizing it now every day. Yes, I am—“I am free.” “Alone, alone, I am the one without a second.”

PS. Now I am going to be truly Vivekananda. Did you ever enjoy evil! Ha! Ha! You silly girl, all is good! Nonsense. Some good, some evil. I enjoy the good and I enjoy the evil. I was Jesus and I was Judas Iscariot; both my play, my fun . . . Be brave and face everything—some good, come evil, both welcome, both of you my play. I have no good to obtain, no ideal to clench up to, no ambition to fulfill; I, the diamond mine, am playing with pebbles, good and evil; good for you—evil, come; good for you—good, you come too. If the universe tumbles round my ears, what is that to me? I am Peace that passeth all understanding; understanding only gives us good or evil. I am beyond, I am peace.⁶²

Swamiji’s attitude towards suffering. Suffering is the greatest teacher. Swamiji says, “In studying the great characters the world has produced, it would be found that it was misery that taught

more than happiness, it was poverty that taught more than wealth, it was blows that brought out their inner fire more than praise.”⁶³ Although most people are willing to suffer greatly for worldly gains, they dread the spiritual suffering of self-denial and self-sacrifice. They pray to God only for happiness and peace. Swamiji was of the opposite nature. We read in the *Imitation of Christ* that there are “few who desire suffering . . . few follow Him in the humiliation of His cross.”⁶⁴ The mystic further says, “Sometimes, he is so greatly comforted by the desire to suffer adversity for the love of conforming to the Cross . . . that he would not wish to be without grief and pain, for he knows that the more he can suffer for His sake, the more pleasing he will be to God . . . That which nature fears and avoids, he boldly meets and loves through ardour of spirit.”⁶⁵ Swamiji accepted pain. More than this, he welcomed pain and sometimes longed for it: “It is a mistake to hold that with all men pleasure is the motive. Quite as many are born to seek pain. There can be bliss in torture too.”⁶⁶ Suffering makes us grow spiritually. Swamiji once wrote to a devotee, “I fervently wish no misery ever came near anyone; yet it is that alone that gives us an insight into the depths of our lives, is it not? In our moments of anguish, gates barred forever seem to open and let in many a flood of light. We learn as we grow.”⁶⁷ Those who are earnest and sincere in their spiritual life are not afraid of adversity. Sometimes, they will even seek it as evidence of their love for God. The greatest of these are the prophets who accept their suffering with love for the sake of redeeming humanity. The cross of the prophet is never the cross of the ordinary person. The prophet lives, moves and performs all actions while in a constant state of Pure Consciousness.

Price of redemptive grace. The highest idea symbolized by the cross is redemptive sacrifice. Swamiji was a prophet with a universal message. He was born to redeem others. He carried the burden of human ignorance and sorrow willingly and voluntarily with loving compassion. Sri Ramakrishna blessed him by giving him power to redeem others, as he had done. That power included

the heavy cross of self-sacrifice. “I may have had Divine help—true,” wrote Swamiji, “but oh, the pound of blood every bit of Divine help has been to me!”⁶⁸ Towards the end of his life, he exclaimed:

I had to work till I am at death’s door and had to spend nearly all that energy in America, so that the Americans can learn to be broader and more spiritual. . . . Anyhow, I am quite satisfied with my work. I never planned anything. I have taken things as they came. Only one idea was burning in my brain—to start the machine for elevating the Indian masses—and that I have succeeded in doing to a certain extent . . . my boys are working in the midst of famine and disease and misery—nursing by the mat-bed of the cholera-stricken Pariah and feeding the starving Chandala—and the Lord sends help to me and to them all. “What are men?” He is with me, my Beloved; He was when I was in America, in England, when I was roaming about unknown from place to place in India. What do I care about what they talk . . . What! I, who have realised the Spirit and the vanity of all earthly nonsense, to be swerved from my path. . . .

I never wanted earthly enjoyments. I must see my machine in good working order, and then knowing sure that I have put in a lever for the good of humanity, in India at least, which no power can drive back, I will sleep, without caring what will be next; and 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, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship. . . .

My time is short . . . the power behind me is not Vivekananda but He the Lord, and He knows best. If I have to please the world, that will be injuring the world; the voice of the majority is wrong, seeing that they govern and make the sad state of the world.⁶⁹

Swamiji’s transcendence of suffering. In his brief life, Swamiji demonstrated that he had risen above misery. His life was filled with purposefulness and dynamism. Swamiji once defined

renunciation as “the love of death” and had no fear of death. The hero of Divinity had a heroic message to impart to the world. Swamiji said:

Great men have died. Weak men have died. Gods have died. Death—death everywhere. This world is a graveyard of the infinite past, yet we cling to this [body]: “I am never going to die.”⁷⁰

Will such a day come when this life will go for the sake of others’ good? The world is not a child’s play—and great men are those who build highways for others with their heart’s blood. This has been taking place through eternity, that one builds a bridge by laying down his own body, and thousands of others cross the river through its help. “Be it so! Be it so! I am Shiva! I am Shiva!”⁷¹

Swamiji, an unsurpassed model of heroism. Heroes encourage the world to make progress through their own inspiring example. There is a human tendency to emulate heroes. The man or woman who has achieved excellence in science, technology, literature, poetry or philosophy, the talented performer, the intrepid adventurer and the sports champion all stir our imagination and inspire young people to follow in their footsteps. The result may be new achievements or feats, but there is no spiritual awakening or transformation.

Drawn by the sufferings of humanity, heroic spiritual personalities come in every age to reawaken the healthy spiritual values of life. They accept the prison of the human body in their earthly exile. They bear the sufferings of others and their own without comfort. They are supreme exemplars of spiritual purity, compassion, universal love, fearlessness and self-sacrifice. They are the manifestation of infinite Truth, of *supreme Divine Love*. They are spiritually courageous and daring beyond all human ability. They are capable of transforming others. Therefore, they are to be distinguished from ordinary heroes, patriots and reformers.

Swamiji is the highest kind of hero who brings imperishable, lasting, immortal truths to bear in our mundane lives.

Before leaving for America in May 1893, Swamiji had said to Swami Turiyananda at Mount Abu, “Haribhai, I am still unable to understand anything of your so-called religion. But my heart has expanded very much, and I have learnt to feel. Believe me, I feel intensely indeed.”⁷² He had wept, and a deep silence had followed. Swami Turiyananda wrote, “Are not these, I thought, the very words and feelings of Buddha? . . . I could clearly perceive that the sufferings of humanity were pulsating in the heart of Swamiji: his heart was a huge cauldron in which the sufferings of mankind were being made into a healing balm.”⁷³

His affinity with the heart of Buddha helps us to understand Swamiji’s strong words to his countrymen who were ambitious to do great things for their nation. He told them, “First, feel from the heart . . . Feel, therefore, my would-be reformers, my would-be patriots! Do you feel? . . . Does it make you restless? Does it make you sleepless? . . . Has it made you almost mad?”⁷⁴ Such words will not stir worldly people whose goals are pleasure, wealth and power. His words are for the person who wants to improve his or her character, for the sincere spiritual aspirant and the monastic disciple—these will make his words their own. They are words to install in the shrine of one’s heart, words to live by. They were spoken by one of the greatest heroes the world has ever known and will ever know. Swamiji willingly spent his entire life and shed every drop of his blood working ceaselessly with love for the rebirth of a “man-making religion” in India and for the welfare of man. Did he not say, “I give, and there it ends. It is gone from me. My mind, my powers, my everything that I have to give, is given: given with the idea to give, and no more.”⁷⁵ That is Swamiji’s idea of perfect unselfishness.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977), VI: 419. [Hereafter C. W.]
- ² C. W., VII: 521.
- ³ *Ibid*, IV: 419.
- ⁴ *Vivekachudamani of Sri Sankaracharya*, (“*Crest-jewel of Discrimination*”) Swami Madhavananda, Trans. (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1952), Sloka no. 39, p. 15.
- ⁵ C. W., VII: 85.
- ⁶ *Bhagavad-Gita*, 3: 21-23.
- ⁷ C. W., IV: 152.
- ⁸ Udbodhan, Vivekananda Centenary Number, p. 262.
- ⁹ *The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples*, Volume 1 (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 10th imp., 2010, in two volumes), p. 134. [Hereafter *Life of SV, Vol. 1*, 2010]
- ¹⁰ St. Mark, 8: 34. See also St. Matthew, 16: 24.
- ¹¹ C. W., VI: 359.
- ¹² *Ibid*.
- ¹³ *Life of SV, Vol. 1*, [2010], pp. 123-6.
- ¹⁴ *Letters of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1976), p. 247. [Hereafter *Letters*]
- ¹⁵ C. W., VIII: 80-3 passim.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 81-2 passim.
- ¹⁷ *Life of SV, Vol. 1*, 2010, p. 195.
- ¹⁸ C. W., VIII: 84.
- ¹⁹ *Life of SV, Vol. 1*, 2010, p. 257.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, 352-3.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, p. 371.
- ²² *Ibid*, p. 372.
- ²³ *Ibid*.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*.
- ²⁵ *Life of SV, Vol. 1*, 2010, pp. 373-4.
- ²⁶ Letter to Alasinga Perumal, 20 August 1893. C. W., V: 16. See also *Letters*, p. 42.
- ²⁷ Letter to Alasinga Perumal, 20 August 1893. C. W., V: 12. See also *Letters*, p. 39.
- ²⁸ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West, New Discoveries, Vol. 1, “The Prophetic Mission”* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992, 4th ed.), p. 20, note 63.
- ²⁹ C. W., VIII: 85.
- ³⁰ *The Life of Swami Vivekananda By His Eastern and Western Disciples*

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- (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 5th ed., 1974), p. 292. [Hereafter *Life*]
- ³¹ *Life of SV, Vol. I*, 2010, p. 439.
- ³² *C. W.*, VIII: 83.
- ³³ Letter to Mrs. Bull, 14 February 1895. *C. W.*, VI: 300.
- ³⁴ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries, Volume 3* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1985), pp. 44-5.
- ³⁵ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1958), p. 329.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Letter to Alasinga Perumal, 6 May 1895. *C. W.*, V: 83.
- ³⁸ Letter to Alasinga Perumal, 14 May 1895. *C. W.*, V: 84.
- ³⁹ Letter to Mrs. Bull, May 1895. *C. W.*, VI: 308.
- ⁴⁰ Letter to Miss Mary Hale, 22 June 1895. *C. W.*, VIII: 340.
- ⁴¹ *The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples, Volume II*, 5th ed., rev. and enl. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1981), p. 19.
- ⁴² Letter to Mr. E. T. Sturdy, 14 September 1899. *C. W.*, VIII: 471-2 passim.
- ⁴³ Letter to Mr. E. T. Sturdy, c/o F. H. Leggett, November 1899. *Letters*, pp. 398-401 passim. See also *C. W.*, VII: 511-515 passim.
- ⁴⁴ Letter to Miss Isabelle McKindley, 26 April 1894. *C. W.*, VII: 462.
- ⁴⁵ *Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume* (Calcutta: Swami Vivekananda Centenary Committee, 1963), p. 213.
- ⁴⁶ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1958), p. 316.
- ⁴⁷ Romain Rolland, *The Life and Gospel of Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979), p. 35.
- ⁴⁸ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda, His Second Visit to the West, New Discoveries* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1973), p. 634.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Life*, p. 719.
- ⁵¹ Letter to Miss Mary Hale, 2 March 1900. *C. W.*, VIII: 494.
- ⁵² *Life*, p. 646.
- ⁵³ Letter to Mrs. Ole Bull, 15 February 1900. *C. W.*, VIII: 491.
- ⁵⁴ Letter to Miss Mary Hale, 20 February 1900. *C. W.*, VIII: 492-3 passim.
- ⁵⁵ Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography* (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1971), p. 302.
- ⁵⁶ *C. W.*, II: 403.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, III: 193.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII: 390.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, VI: 420-1.
- ⁶⁰ Letter to Miss Mary Hale, 12 March 1900. *C. W.*, VIII: 501.
- ⁶¹ Letter to Miss Mary Hale, 22 March 1900. *C. W.*, VIII: 503.
- ⁶² Letter to Miss Mary Hale, 28 March 1900. *C. W.*, VIII: 503-5 passim.

⁶³ C. W., I: 27.

⁶⁴ Thomas á Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1952), p. 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 86-7.

⁶⁶ *Life*, p. 597.

⁶⁷ C. W., VIII: 466.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, VI: 420.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, V: 135-6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, IV: 244.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, VI: 273-4.

⁷² *Life of SV, Vol. 1*, 2010, p. 388.

⁷³ *Ibid*.

⁷⁴ C. W., III: 225-6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, VIII: 87.