
A Soul of Light: A Reading of Three Poems of Vivekananda

Ayon Halder

Research Scholar, Kalyani University, West Bengal, India

India has given birth to several Hindu religious reformers along with influential spiritual personalities who have contributed to build the nation. They have all stressed upon the fact that India is avowedly the most notable country where religious introspection has fairly a long cherished history. Vivekananda is mainly considered to be an eminent figure among the others for making Hindu religion popular among the people of the West. He has always been eager to look into all other religious doctrines in order to broaden the mental horizon and support the ideals of religious tolerance. He has a firm conviction that no nation can progress without possessing an inherently strong religiosity. As an Indian monk he never has any reservations against other religious doctrines and this proves quite evident if we go through his poem No One to Blame in which he explains the essence of Buddhist philosophy. In one of his lectures while Vivekananda draws a comparison between Hinduism and Buddhist philosophy he explicitly admits that "The Vedanta philosophy is the foundation of Buddhism and everything else in India, and the Advaita philosophy of the modern school has a great many conclusions similar to those of the Buddhists." When he composes the poem No One to Blame he has already established himself as a successful orator with thoughtful introspection into the religious ideas worldwide. But it has not been an easy way for him as he has to struggle hard amid several hindrances. When he acquires high appreciations driving away all worries and miseries he can hardly remain stagnant and meditates ceaselessly upon the wandering life of a monk.

In this poem No One to Blame Vivekananda relates his sufferings and achievements to his own deeds. According to Buddhism sufferings and dissatisfactions originate from craving or desire conditioned by the ignorance. Human beings are ignorant of the true nature of things which are in a state of flux. That desire is the cause of suffering on earth also alludes to the Buddhist law conditionality dependent origination which unfolds the truth that nothing exists as an individual entity and everything arises upon multiple causes and conditions. As in the principles of dependent origination karma or action of human being will lead to a corresponding result. Karma is the driving force that makes the cycle of suffering and rebirth possible for each being. Vivekananda is much aware of the ideals of Siddhartha Gautama who propagates that sentient beings have to end their sufferings through the elimination of ignorance and cravings in order to attain the cessation of all sufferings after reaching the sublimated state of Nirvana. In this poem Vivekananda in the beginning refers to the vision of a 'dying day' which resembles the mature state of realization of a human being. The dusk of twilight evokes a sense of shame in Vivekananda who recapitulates the memory of his success in the West but cannot help accusing himself for the shameful triumph. These achievements become blurred when the realization of the essential truths of life arises in him. Vivekananda is confronted with the revelation of the intrinsic truth of human existence on earth throughout the poem as he becomes aware of the fact he cannot evade the result of any intentional action

of his own. In the second stanza of No One to Blame he poignantly points to the chain of action and result (karmaphala) from which he cannot dissociate himself. Then he goes to the extent of narrating the idea of rebirth determined by the action. According to Buddhism liberation (moksha) is attained only when the realization of true identity evokes through the disassociation of body and mind which are always subjected to change and also imperfect as well. In this way Vivekananda draws our attention to the similar ideas of liberation of Advaita Vedanta, according to which Brahman remains at the root our illusory material world and the experience of oneness from the illusion of mundane existence. However as long as human being continues to engage himself with the illusion of the worldly existence he suffers from the effect from his every action and he has to admit that he is solely responsible for his own destiny. Vivekananda confesses in this poem that he casts off the fear of destiny which life may have in store for him and also stops lamenting as he begins to feel the effect of his own action or karma. He is also painfully aware that he can never expect pleasure unattended by any sense of pain because "good, bad, love, hate, and pleasure and pain" all are closely related to each other. In this way Vivekananda completes a personal journey in the poem where he wishes to give away all his desires to achieve liberation and claims that "eternal life is what I want". He is full of praise for Buddha whom he identifies as the "ever perfect soul". He is attuned to the ideals of Buddhism as he remains alive to the basic tenets - "the death is curse and so is life, and the best when stops to be". The release from the deluded existence is possible according to non-dualist Vedantism in which the goal of personalized self is to negate itself to be aware of the existence of the absolute reality, Brahman that permeates into on earth. This is the process of self-abnegation which guides one to the realization of Existence

Absolute, Knowledge Absolute and Bliss Absolute. This is the journey of the soul that goes deeper into the phenomena to reach in Kantian term the noumena which always remains hidden beneath the veil. Vivekananda has been able to combine the philosophy of a particular sect of Hindu religion with the doctrine of Buddhism in the poem and with his desire to pay homage to the awakened and enlightened sage Buddha at the end of No One to Blame he lays bare the fact that he has assimilated the principles of all religions of his country. He is of the opinion that India as a nation can never shed her spirituality at the stake of development. In other words according to him India should set herself as an example to the other nations of the world in order to build a nation the adoption of the essences of religious principles is mandatory and also there should never be any censuring to any specific religious community at all.

Vivekananda decides to train individuals in America in the principles of Vedanta and initiates disciples among whom Sister Christine is one who receives a poem titled To an Early Violet from Vivekananda. This is a poem encouraging Christine not to yield to any adverse situations. Life may be full of struggles which are sometimes hard to overcome but one should never escape from it. One needs to have a firm conviction about his own abilities and true self. The person who loses self-belief also becomes bereft of self-respect in this process. The flower violet stands for sweetness and purity of soul much like the lamb in Blake's poem The Lamb. Whereas the lamb is associated with tender qualities Vivekananda in this poem does not intend to refer to the mildness of the violet flower but asks it to be resilient amid all turmoil. Human soul is tantamount to the 'gentle bloom' which is capable of withstanding the onslaught of hostile wintry weather. Like the previous poem of Vivekananda there is also an

undercurrent of Vedantism in this one. In his essays and letters Vivekananda seems to be like a practitioner of practical Vedantism. Mere reading of texts of Upanishad will not hold any good for human being but all have to take recourse to Vedanta to grow strong at heart and at the same become compassionate and sympathetic towards the whole humanity. Each and every being on earth has the divinity within and that being is also the essential part of the eternal universe. Ignorance to this truth breeds enmity and hatred. If a human being shows condescending attitude to another he is in a way belittles himself because they both are the physical manifestations of the holistic universal entity. This is the kernel of monism of Advaita Vedanta that can be deployed as a useful medium to ward off racial discrimination and vindicate women emancipation. Vedanta does not boast of salvation but ensures liberation of the soul. According to Vivekananda the people of India unfortunately suffer from the lack inner strength and courage but they will become powerful both physically and mentally if they introspect into the ideals of Vedanta. If the people of a nation are engrossed in sensory delights they will inevitably become inane and weak inside but the lessons of Vedanta will enlighten him with the idea of the transcendental reality. This will result in a sense of self-belief and confidence in them. His firm conviction in the principles of Vedantism culminates in a four line poem titled Light written to Josephine Macleod from Belur Math on the 26th December in 1900. Interestingly enough the poem bears close resemblance to the poem To a Skylark of P.B. Shelley in its rhyme pattern—"I look behind after/ And find that all is right,/ In my deepest sorrows/ There is a soul of light." In Shelley's poem he purports to convey the message that man always longs for unreal objects which are impossible to attain and this reveals the fact that the 'sincerest laughter' is always tinged with a sense of pain. Thus the

romantic poet resorts to Platonic idealism which stresses upon that the beauty and joy of this world is in fact a pale shadow of the ideal world. Vivekananda's poem is in a way the inversion of the thematic idea of Shelley as the Indian poet develops the truth of Vedantic philosophy that runs counter to the pessimistic tone of Shelley. Also 'Soul of Light' acts as the illumination of optimism that emanates from the unshakable faith in Vedantism. Vivekananda is always critical of the low self-confidence and narrow mindedness of the Indians who should drag themselves out of the abyss to progress further towards a positive goal and according to him the people of India need to fall back on the scriptures of Vedantism that can evoke a spiritual regeneration in this nation. If they succeed in this endeavour India may again hold a superior position among the materially developed nations. He always upholds the Vedantic morality which negates egotism of an individual self and grows an immanent strength. He proclaims that spiritual reformation will inevitably precede everything else because this will provide the impetus to construct a powerful nation. Vivekananda does not profess to follow the path of Vedanta blindly but draws attention to the fact that it should be practiced in both private and public life emphasizing upon the personal experience that is generated within. He does not champion absolute negation or complete withdrawal from the worldly experiences but preach to be absorbed in the contemplation of the impersonal Brahman. Through the idea of considering self as a false identification he asserts that we can perceive Brahman manifested in every creature and this perception will usher in everlasting joy and happiness. This realization will necessarily lessen the fissures among races, classes and castes. The preaching of the East will enrich the West which can also motivate the East to be engrossed in strenuous physical activities.

Vivekananda intends to see the all around upliftment of the Indians. He believes that the spiritual reformation should be the most important agenda of the contemporary period as it can provide the strength to form national consciousness. Vivekananda always relies heavily on building the character of the individual who has to be both physically and mentally well equipped to carry forward the ideology of spiritual existence and in this way contributes his part to uphold a strong national identity and integrity. According to him to build a nation the lessons of the scriptures must be put to action. This will bring about a sea change in the destitute condition of the wretched Indians who do not seem to be able to possess enough courage and confidence to shape their own destiny in the social life. Vivekananda himself is indeed a 'soul of light' that elevates millions of Indians who have become oblivious of the legacy of their past and guides them to march forward with bold steps towards a brighter future by clearing away all the glooms of miseries and concerns. The mass based Hinduism that he conceives as the urgent need for the Indians renders him an ideal Renaissance figure in nineteenth century colonial Bengal. His religious ideas run counter to the reformist atmosphere of the contemporary age which is immensely significant in the social and cultural history of Bengal. As an iconoclast in his youth Vivekananda has been a sceptical who is also to an extent influenced by the Comtean Positivist ideas prevalent in that time. Later it can also be traced in his practical Vedanta that relies on the inherently progressive religious ideology. The idea of apparently secular religion of humanity is quintessentially positivist in nature. But he also turns away from his revolutionary ideals and opts for a religious reformation that becomes dominant in the last decade of the nineteenth century as Narasingha Prasad Sil observes, "His youthful eclecticism and cosmopolitanism would

decline towards the end of his life". He has been introduced to the poems of visionary poet P.B.Shelley in his earlier life by his fellow compatriot Brajendra Nath Seal. The pantheistic belief along with the omnipresent spirit which is referred to in the poems of the revolutionary poet of British Romantic period leaves an indelible mark in Vivekananda. Thus the 'gentle bloom' in the poem titled To an Early Violet echoes the 'spirit of Beauty' in Shelley's Hymn to Intellectual Beauty. In a way the spiritual regeneration in the reformist mould comes closer to Kantian idealism that propounds that human mind is an active faculty with conceptual capacity to grasp the essence of the experience outside. This becomes quite evident as he delivers these words, "Mind is the action of its own nature. Mind-activity means creation. The thought is followed by the word and the word by the form." There is a confluence of thoughts and ideas across the boundary of nation and it gradually builds the grand idea of religious toleration in Vivekananda who has "acquired and retained, over time, a pan Indian and pan Hindu resonance." He becomes receptive to all the existing thought currents and curves a niche of his own through the formation of the universal religion that gives rise to the Hindu spiritual nationalism towards the fag end of nineteenth century in Bengal.

Primary Source - Vivekananda Vedanta Network - Archived Readings.
url: vivekananda.org/archivedReadings.asp

REFERENCES

1. Dhar, Niranjana. *Vedanta and the Bengal Renaissance*, Minerva, 1977.
2. Sil, Narasingha Prasad. *Swami Vivekananda: A Reassessment*, Associated University Presses, 1997.
3. Dasgupta, Subrata. *Awakening: The Story of the Bengal Renaissance*, Random house India, 2011

4. Vivekananda, Swami. The Indispensable Vivekananda: An Anthology for Our Times. Edited by Amiya. P. Sen. Permanent Black.
5. Vivekananda, Swami. 'Buddhism and Vedanta', Notes from Lectures and Discourses, url: www.Ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume_5