

The Social Thought of Swami Vivekananda

by Swami Atmajnanananda

NOTE: Swami Atmajnanananda is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order who I met at the Trabuco Canyon monastery while I lived in Orange County, CA. A skeptical friend of mine wanted to know more about Vedanta and its philosophy, and Swami Atmajnanananda gave her this piece. I was quite impressed with it, and asked him if I could post it on the Net. The Swami is now the head of a new Vedanta Center in Silver Spring, Maryland. (For information call 301-603-1772.)
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Please note that when "CW" is mentioned after a quote, it refers to The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. The number after the "CW" is the volume number.

INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda once remarked to a disciple in San Francisco, "You know, I may have to be born again. You see, I have fallen in love with man." (*Swami Vivekananda in San Francisco*, p. 13) When we study the life of Swami Vivekananda and read his lectures and writings, particularly his letters, we see what a tremendous force this love of mankind was for him.

From the time he decided to come to the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 up until the end of his short life in 1902, his love for mankind, his sympathy for the poor and downtrodden of all lands, and his great devotion to his Motherland and her depressed masses were the motivating power behind all of his actions. In his social views, whether on caste, education, women's rights, or the conditions of the masses, the one common factor was his great sympathy for all who suffer. It was this sympathy of heart which impelled him to accomplish as much as he did in such a short period of time; and it was the same sympathy of heart which brought so much suffering to his life as well.

In considering the social philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, we should always keep one thing in mind: Swamiji was not a man to be easily categorized. He himself had a distinct distaste for any "isms", and **it would be a mistake to try to categorize his beliefs as falling within any particular school of thought, such as humanism, socialism, or the like.**

Undoubtedly, many of his views are in sympathy with those of different political and social philosophies, and various proponents of different schools have rightfully drawn inspiration from his words and deeds. However, **Swamiji's teachings were never**

based on any sectarian allegiance, but rather on his own spiritual convictions regarding the divinity of the soul, the oneness of existence, and the worship of God in man.

In the following few pages, we will examine the views of Swami Vivekananda on such questions as privilege, caste, education, uplifting the masses, and women's rights. We will also look at the various circumstances and events of his life which helped awaken his latent love for humanity: the influence of his family; the teachings of his beloved master, Sri Ramakrishna; his own first-hand experience of poverty; and his years of wandering through India.

Above all, we will try to show the perfect consistency between Swamiji's social views and his spiritual realizations, between his actions and his beliefs; for rarely has such a blend of head and heart, spiritual genius and sympathy for mankind, ever been seen in the world.



PRIVILEGE

Convinced as he was of the divinity of each soul and, consequently, of the dignity of each individual, Swami Vivekananda waged a steady battle against all types of privilege and exploitation. In his eyes, all distinctions whereby one might distinguish one person from another, such as caste, creed, race, or gender, were based, not on the true nature of the individual, but on external superimpositions. From the highest point of view, all are pure spirit and, as such, share an essential identity. **Thus, all attempts to exercise exclusive rights at the expense of others were seen by him to be both an affront to the human dignity of man and a contradiction of the spiritual fact of unity.**

In a lecture delivered in London, entitled "Vedanta and Privilege", Swamiji spoke out against the phenomenon of privilege at all levels of society:

. . . the idea of privilege is the bane of human life. Two forces, as it were, are constantly at work, one making caste, and the other breaking caste; in other words, the one making for privilege, and the other breaking down privilege. And whenever privilege is broken down, more and more light and progress come to a race. This struggle we see all around us.

Of course, there is first the brutal idea of privilege, that of the strong over the weak. There is the privilege of wealth. If a man has more money than another, he wants a little privilege over those who have less. There is the still subtler and more powerful privilege of intellect; because one man knows more than others, he claims more privilege. And last of all, and the worst, because the most tyrannical, is the privilege of spirituality.

If some persons think they know more of spirituality, of God, they claim a superior privilege over everyone else. They say, "Come down and worship us, ye

common herds; we are the messengers of God, and you have to worship us." None can be Vedantists, and at the same time admit of privilege for anyone. The same power is in every man, the one manifesting more, the other less; the same potentiality is in everyone. Where is the claim to privilege? (CW, I.423)



THE QUESTION OF CASTE

The question of caste and its relation to privilege was one with which Swami Vivekananda struggled long and hard. We can see from some of his early letters to Pramadadas Mitra, a learned scholar for whom Swamiji had great respect, how troubled Swamiji was with certain aspects of caste. One of the letters which Swamiji wrote to him from the Baranagore Math raised several questions with regard to caste, specifically concerning hereditary caste and the rights of Sudas to study the scriptures.

Swamiji's opinion on caste in general is not always entirely clear. In some of his writings and lectures, especially when responding to criticisms of the caste system from the West, he defends the concept of caste as representing a sensible and necessary division of labor. However, he was uncompromising with regard to his hatred of hereditary caste, of the notion that one's station in life was to be determined by birth alone rather than by one's ability or natural propensities. Though he sometimes blamed religion for the modern caste structure, Swamiji's mature opinion seems to have been that religion was not to blame and that the earliest references to caste in the Hindu scriptures do not contain the notion of hereditary caste.

It is interesting to note that many of the early questions regarding caste which Swami Vivekananda first raised in his letter to Pramadadas Mitra in 1889 are answered by Swamiji himself in his final letter to the scholar and longtime friend, written in 1897. Much time had passed since Swamiji had last written, and it is clear from the tone of the letter that their relationship had become somewhat strained. In this particular letter, Swamiji voiced what may be considered his final opinion on caste, whether hereditary or not, and on its relation to the scriptures. He wrote:

. . . the conviction is daily gaining on my mind that the idea of caste is the greatest dividing factor and the root of Maya; all caste either on the principle of birth or of merit is bondage. . . . The Smritis and the Puranas are productions of men of limited intelligence and are full of fallacies, errors, the feeling of caste, and malice. . . It is in the books written by priests that madness like that of caste are to be found, and not in books revealed from God. (*Letters*, pp. 337)

Swamiji's quarrel with the caste system centered around two separate, yet related, issues, one economic and one religious. He blamed caste, in part at least, for the social divisiveness which resulted in large disenfranchised segments of Indian society and for the grinding poverty of the masses.

He held the higher castes, particularly the Brahmins, responsible for the evils of priestcraft, for untouchability, and for their exclusive claims on spirituality and the

sacred scriptures. In his reply to the address of the Maharaja of Khetri, Swamiji remarked,

This [tyranny of the upper castes] is the bane of human nature, the curse upon mankind, the root of all misery -- this inequality. This is the source of all bondage, physical, mental, and spiritual.(CW, IV. 329)

Swamiji reiterated the same theme in even stronger language to his brother disciple, Swami Ramakrishnananda, in a letter written from Chicago in 1894:

My brother, what experiences I have had in the South [of India], of the upper classes torturing the lower! What Bacchanalian orgies within the temples! Is it a religion that fails to remove the misery of the poor and turn men into gods! Do you think our religion is worth the name? Ours is only Don't-touchism, only "Touch me not", "Touch me not". Good heavens! A country, the big leaders of which have for the last two thousand years been only discussing whether to take food with the right hand or left, whether to take water from the right-hand side or from the left. . . if such a country does not go to ruin, what other will? . . . A country where millions of people live on flowers of the Mohua plant, and a million or two of sadhus and a hundred million or so of Brahmins suck the blood out of these poor people, without the least effort for their amelioration -- is that a country or hell? Is that a religion or the devil's dance? (CW, VI. 253)

Swami Vivekananda's quarrel with priestcraft centered around the notion of *adhikaravada*, the restriction of the study of the Vedas and other privileges to the Brahmin caste. Swamiji seemed to have held Sankaracharya especially responsible for upholding the exclusive practices of *adhikaravada*. Time and again, in both his letters and his utterances, he refers to Shankara's narrowness and lack of sympathy, even while praising his brilliant intellect.

As early as 1889, in the aforementioned letter to Pramadadas Mitra, Swamiji raised the question of Shankara's authority for excluding Sudras from studying the Vedas. In several of his later letters, he also criticized Shankara for his lack of liberality, contrasting him with the compassionate Buddha. In a letter to his brother disciple, Swami Akhandananda, he wrote:

What Buddha did was to break wide open the gates of that very religion which was confined in the Upanishads to a particular caste. . . His greatness lies in his unrivalled sympathy. The high orders of samadhi etc., that lent gravity to his religion, are almost all there in the Vedas; what are absent there are his intellect and heart, which have never since been paralleled throughout the history of the world. . . The religion of Buddha has reared itself on the Upaniads, and upon that also the philosophy of Shankara. Only Shankara had not the slightest bit of Buddha's wonderful heart, dry intellect merely! For fear of the Tantras, for fear of the mob, in his attempt to cure a boil, he amputated the very arm itself. (CW, VI. 225-27)

And in the course of a conversation with his disciple, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, Swamiji said:

Shankara's intellect was sharp like a razor. He was a good arguer and a scholar, no doubt of that, but he had no great liberality; his heart too seems to have been like that. Besides, he used to take great pride in his Brahmanism -- much like a southern Brahmin of the priest class, you may say. How he has defended in his commentary on the *Vedanta Sutr*s that the non-Brahmin castes will not attain to a supreme knowledge of Brahman! . . . But look at Buddha's heart! -- Ever ready to give his own life to save the life of even a kid -- what to speak of *bahujanahitaya bahujanasukhaya* -- For the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many"! See what a large-heartedness -- what a compassion. (CW, VII. 117-18)



RICH VS POOR

Perhaps the only injustice which troubled Swami Vivekananda more than caste prejudice was the tyranny of the wealthy over the poor, a tyranny which, in India, was related to, but not restricted to, the caste system. Swamiji's sympathy for the poor and downtrodden was one of his most outstanding traits and was the dominant motivating force behind many of his activities, including his initial visit to America and his founding of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.

His utterances regarding the plight of the poor, particularly the depressed masses of India, are some of his most passionate and inspiring. In a letter to his Madras disciples, Swamiji wrote, "Feel, my children, feel; feel for the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden; feel till the heart stops and the brain reels and you think you will go mad --then pour the soul out at the feet of the Lord, and then will come power, help, and indomitable energy. . ." (CW, IV. 367)

In this same letter, Swami Vivekananda pointed out the two crying needs of the poor: "bread" and education. He wrote:

Material civilization, nay, even luxury, is necessary to create work for the poor. Bread! Bread! I do not believe in a God who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven! Pooh! India is to be raised, the poor are to be fed, education is to be spread, and the evil of priestcraft is to be removed. . . More bread, more opportunity for everybody. . . (CW, IV. 368)

And in a lecture delivered in Lahore, he said:

What we want is not so much spirituality as a little of the bringing down of the Advaita into the material world. We stuff them too much with religion, when the poor fellows have been starving. No dogmas will satisfy the cravings of hunger. (CW, III. 432)

Swamiji placed great emphasis on education for the upliftment of the Indian masses. It was his desire that all aspects of life be covered in this education, so that it would be conducive to the material, intellectual, and spiritual development of the individual. Above all, he wanted a "man-making" education that would build

character, give the masses back their "lost individuality", and restore their faith in their own divine potential. As in all matters of social reform, Swamiji's motto was "hands off". As he explained to the Maharaja of Mysore:

The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, to develop their lost individuality. . . They are to be given ideas; their eyes are to be opened to what is going on in the world around them, and then they will work out their own salvation. Every nation, every man, every woman, must work out one's own salvation. Give them idea -- that is the only help they require, and then the rest must follow as the effect. Ours is to put the chemicals together, the crystallization comes in the law of nature. Our duty is to put ideas in their heads, they will do the rest. (*Letters*, pp. 117-18)

Swami Vivekananda also saw that the regeneration of the Indian masses would necessarily involve certain sacrifices on the part of the upper classes, whether voluntarily performed or not. He held the wealthy, educated, and privileged segments of society particularly responsible for the plight of the poor and predicted dire consequences for them if they failed to work towards rectifying conditions. He wrote:

So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them! I call those men who strut about in their finery, having got all their money by grinding the poor, wretches, so long as they do not do anything for those two hundred millions who are now no better than human savages. (*CW*, V. 58)

The duty of every aristocracy is to dig its own grave, and the sooner it does so, the better. The more it delays, the more it will fester and the worse death it will die. It is the duty of the Brahmin, therefore, to work for the salvation of the rest of mankind in India. (*CW*, III. 297)

Furthermore, if working for the betterment of the masses meant showing favoritism toward them at the expense of the upper class, Swamiji was more than willing to do so. He was adamant that the poor be served first. In his "Addresses on Bhakti-Yoga", he stated:

The first of everything should go to the poor; we have only a right to what remains. The poor are God's representatives; anyone that suffers is his representative. Without giving, he who eats and enjoys eating, enjoys sin. (*CW*, IV. 10)

And to his brother disciples, he wrote:

But our mission is for the destitute, the poor, and the illiterate peasantry and laboring classes, and if, after everything has been done for them first, there is spare time, then only for the gentry. (*CW*, VI. 427)

If there is inequality in nature, still there must be equal chance for all -- or if greater for some and for some less -- the weaker should be given more chance than the strong. In other words, a Brahmin is not so much in need of education

as a Chandala. If the son of a Brahmin needs one teacher, that of a Chandala needs ten. (CW, VI. 319)



THE CONDITION OF WOMEN

Another great concern of Swamiji's was the condition of women, not as an isolated social issue, but as intimately connected with the well-being of society as a whole. He wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing." (CW, VI. 328)

Swamiji's attitude toward women's rights was very much the same as his attitude toward all social questions: help should be given only in removing the obstacles impeding progress; education should be offered when necessary; then "hands off". In a lecture delivered in India, he said:

Liberty is the first condition of growth. It is wrong, a thousand times wrong, if any of you dares to say, "I will work out the salvation of this woman or child." I am asked again and again what I think of the woman question. Let me answer once for all -- am I a widow that you ask me that nonsense? Am I a woman that you ask me that question again and again? Who are you to solve women's problems? Are you the Lord God that you should rule over every widow and every woman? Hands off! They will solve their own problems. (CW, III. 246)

Swami Vivekananda's great objection to the treatment of women as second-class citizens was based on two fundamental convictions. The first was his firm belief that all distinctions between individuals based on gender were, from the highest point of view, untenable. Swamiji was convinced that everyone was, in reality, non-different from the one universal Self. As he wrote to his brother disciples, "I shall not rest till I root out this distinction of sex. Is there any sex distinction between man and woman -- all is Atman!" (CW, VI. 272-73)

The second reason why Swamiji was so passionate about improving the condition of women goes back to his old quarrel with *adhikaravada*. According to the exclusive practices of *adhikaravada*, women of all castes were lumped together with Sudras and thus were denied access to the sacred scriptures and forbidden to enjoy certain other religious privileges, such as taking the vows of *sannyasa*. Swamiji considered such treatment neither fair nor in accordance with the authoritative writings of Hinduism. When his disciple, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, referred to the religious restrictions for women, Swamiji replied:

In what scriptures do you find statements that women are not competent for knowledge and devotion? In the period of degradation, when the priests made the other castes incompetent for the study of the Vedas, they deprived the women also of their rights. Otherwise you will find that in the Vedic or Upaniadic age, Maitreyi, Gargi, and other ladies of revered memory have taken the place of Rishis through their skill in discussing about Brahman. . . Since such ideal

women were entitled to spiritual knowledge, why shall not the women have the same privilege now? . . . All nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. **That country and that nation which do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever be in the future.** (CW, VII. 214-15)

Swami Vivekananda was strongly opposed to the restrictions on women taking the vows of renunciation, and he had high hopes for a women's monastic order built around the wonderful life of Holy Mother. In fact, he often spoke of the establishment of a monastery for women as being of a higher priority than one for men. As he explained to Swami Shivananda:

Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world. . . Mother [Holy Mother] has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India; and making her the nucleus, once more will Gargis and Maitreyis be born into the world. . . Hence it is her Math that I want first. . . . First Mother and Mother's daughters, then Father and Father's sons. . . (CW, VII. 482)



SWAMIJI'S LIFE

When we seek to discover the forces which were most instrumental in helping shape the life and character of Swami Vivekananda, we must bear one fact in mind: a Swami Vivekananda is born, not made. There can be no doubt that certain events and people were of great importance in helping him to manifest his innate genius and latent spirituality; but brilliance of intellect, broadness of heart, and spiritual excellence were all natural to Swamiji. Whether he would have captured the hearts and minds of India and the world at large had he never met Sri Ramakrishna or had he never come to America at the time of the Parliament of Religions in 1893 is another question. But it is certain that he would have left his mark on the world in one way or another.

Sri Ramakrishna recognized Swamiji's greatness at first glance. Swamiji, then known as Narendra, described their extraordinary first meeting in the following words:

I thought he would give me some private instructions; but to my utter surprise he began to shed profuse tears of joy as he held my hand, and, addressing me most tenderly as one long familiar to him, said, "Ah, you come so late. How could you be so unkind as to keep me waiting so long! My ears are well-nigh burnt by listening to the profane talk of worldly people. Oh, how I yearn to unburden my mind to one who can appreciate my innermost experience!" Thus he went on amid sobs. The next moment he stood before me with folded hands and began to address me, "Lord, I know you are that ancient sage, Nara, the Incarnation of Narayana, born on earth to remove the miseries of mankind," and so on. (The Life of Swami Vivekananda, I. 76)

It is significant that Sri Ramakrishna addressed the young Narendra as "Nara", for Nara is not only the name of an ancient sage, it is the name for Man. **Swami Vivekananda was, in a very profound sense, humanity personified, the Supreme Spirit**

embodied as Man. He identified himself with the whole of humankind, and his life was lived as an offering to all of humanity. Sri Ramakrishna, with his spiritual insight, could easily see all this in the eyes of the young Narendra and at first sight knew that he was born with a special mission in life: to serve mankind and help remove its suffering.

Narendra was born into an affluent and highly respected family of northern Calcutta. His grandfather, Durgaprasad Datta, and his father, Viswanath Datta, represented two distinct ideals, both of which Swamiji greatly admired. His grandfather became an all-renouncing monk, devoting his life completely to the search for God, and his father, through hard work and perseverance, raised himself from the position of a poor orphan to a wealthy attorney.

But the trait which seems to have impressed Narendra most about his father was his great liberality. Having grown up poor, Viswanath could easily understand the sting of poverty and thus, was unstinting in charity. One of his other sons was later to write, "Extending charity to the poor and the distressed was like a disease with him." (The Life, I. 6)

It was from his mother, Bhuvaneswari Devi, however, that Narendra received his religious training. She was a simple, yet deeply pious, woman who spent her free time in worship and reading the great epics of India. Narendra was extremely devoted to his mother and, even after becoming an all-renouncing monk, looked after her welfare. When, as Swami Vivekananda, he was unjustly criticized by the orthodox Hindus for his behavior in America, his one thought was of his mother. He explained to an American friend:

Now I do not care what they even of my own people say about me_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, would have simply killed her. (CW, VII. 462)

Towards the end of his life, Swamiji took his aged mother with him to visit some of the holy places of East Bengal. He explained to Mrs. Ole Bull, "I am going to take my mother on pilgrimage. . . This is the one great wish of a Hindu widow. I have brought only misery to my people all my life. I am trying to fulfill this one wish of hers." (Vivekananda: A Biography, p. 318)

Narendra's passion for truth and his desire for spiritual realization ultimately led him to the feet of Sri Ramakrishna, and it was here that the contact between the ideal disciple and the perfected master brought about the transformation of the young college student into the all-renouncing, world-conquering Swami Vivekananda. The road was not always smooth, and guru and disciple often engaged in battles of will and intellect, but in the end, the metamorphosis became complete.

It is well-known how Sri Ramakrishna gave unstintingly of his spiritual treasures to his beloved disciple; but it is equally true that he helped to broaden Narendra's already liberal and sympathetic heart. Years after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna, Swamiji would credit his guru with teaching him to feel for the poor and to look upon all with an

equal eye, regardless of caste or creed. He wrote to the Dewan of Junagad, "I love the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden; I feel for the -- the Lord knows how much. . . I have that insight through the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna." (Letters, p. 96) And to Swami Ramakrishnananda, he wrote:

From the very date that he [Sri Ramakrishna] was born, has sprung the Satya-Yuga. Henceforth there is an end to all sorts of distinctions, and everyone down to the Chandala will be a sharer in the Divine Love. The distinction between man and woman, the literate and the illiterate, Brahmins and Chandalas -- he lived to root out all. (CW, VI. 335)

And when Swamiji was accused of being a "Shudra monk", he replied:

. . . but I am not at all hurt if they call me a Shudra. It will be a little reparation for the tyranny of my ancestors over the poor. If I am a Pariah, I will be all the more glad, for I am the disciple of a man, who -- the Brahmin of Brahmins -- wanted to cleanse the house of a Pariah . . . And this man [Sri Ramakrishna] woke up in the dead of night, entered surreptitiously the house of this Pariah, cleansed his latrine, and with his long hair wiped the place, and that he did day after day in order that he might make himself the servant of all. I bear the feet of that man on my head; he is my hero; that hero's life I will try to imitate. (CW, 211-12)

Sri Ramakrishna was also the inspiration for Swami Vivekananda's teachings regarding the worship of God in man. Swami Saradananda relates the following incident in *The Great Master*: One day Sri Ramakrishna was explaining to a group of devotees the three main tenets of the Vaiava faith: name ruci -- a taste for the name of God; jive daya -- compassion for living beings; and vaiava seva -- service to devotees of the Lord.

As he was explaining the meaning of compassion to living beings, he suddenly went into an ecstatic mood. After he had regained normal consciousness to a certain extent, he continued, "Talk of compassion for beings! Will you, who are nothing but little insects, bestow compassion on beings? You wretch, who are you to bestow it? No, no; not compassion to Jivas, but service to them as Siva." (*Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master*, p. 817)

None but Narendra could see the far-reaching implications of Sri Ramakrishna's words that day. Later he remarked, "Ah, what a wonderful light have I got today from the Master's words! . . . If the Divine Lord ever grants me an opportunity, I'll preach everywhere in the world this wonderful truth I have heard today. I will preach this truth to the learned and the ignorant, to the rich and the poor, to the Brahmins and the Chandalas." (*The Great Master*, p. 817)

Swamiji was to give expression to this truth in a letter written many years later to his disciple Sharat Chandra Chakravarty. He wrote:

Here is a peculiarity: when you serve a Jiva with the idea that he is a Jiva, it is Daya (compassion) and not Prema (love); but when you serve him with the idea that he is Self, that is Prema. . . But for us Advaitins, this notion of Jiva as distinct from God is the cause of bondage. Our principle, therefore, should be love and not compassion. The application of the word compassion even to Jiva seems to

me to be rash and vain. For us, it is not to pity but to serve. Ours is not the feeling of compassion but of love, and the feeling of Self in all. (Letters, pp. 410-11)

Narendra's feelings of sympathy for the poor were based not only on a theoretical understanding of the divinity of man, but also on first-hand experience. In 1884, Narendra's father died suddenly of heart failure, and though he had earned a substantial income, his lavish lifestyle and charitable nature left the family deeply in debt. Even the relatives whom Viswanath had supported during his lifetime turned against his family and sought to take control of the ancestral home. For the first time in his life, Narendra felt the pangs of hunger and the additional sting of having to witness the suffering of his near and dear ones. **There can be no question that this painful chapter in Swamiji's life sensitized his already tender heart and made him sympathize even more with the plight of the poor.**

After the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna in 1886, Narendra, now commonly known as Swamiji, banded together a small group of his brother disciples, creating the foundation for the future Ramakrishna Order of monks. Before long, Swamiji felt the call to lead the traditional life of the wandering monk and travelled throughout the vast subcontinent of India. This period of his life was also a great learning experience for Swamiji as he shared both the extreme luxury of the Maharajas and the dire poverty of the masses.

The haunting poverty of his countrymen which he witnessed at this time was too much for him to bear, and he made a personal commitment to work for the upliftment of the masses. As he explained to his brother disciples, Swamis Brahmananda and Turiyananda:

I travelled all over India. But alas, it was agony to me, my brothers, to see with my own eyes the terrible poverty of the masses, and I could not restrain my tears! It is now my firm conviction that to preach religion amongst them, without first trying to remove their poverty and suffering, is futile. It is for this reason -- to find means for the salvation of the poor in India -- that I am going to America. . . Brother, I cannot understand your so-called religion. But my heart has grown much, much larger, and I have learnt to feel. Believe me, I feel it very sadly. (Vivekananda: A Biography, p. 106)

Swami Vivekananda had great hopes of raising funds in America to help educate and raise the masses of India. He was soon to discover, however, that the wealthy of America, like their counterparts in India, were not to be relied on for much help. As a result, Swamiji began to place all his hope for the regeneration of his Motherland on the educated and dedicated youth of India, fired with the spirit of renunciation and service. "Trust not the so-called rich," he was to write, "they are more dead than alive. The hope lies in you -- in the meek, the lowly, but the faithful." (Letters, p. 42) To his brother disciples he wrote:

We want two thousand Sannyasin -- men and women, both. . . Not householder disciples, mind you, we want Sannyasins. Let each one of you have a hundred heads tonsured -- young educated men, not fools. (Letters, p. 102)

And to his Madrasi disciple Alasinga he wrote:

A hundred thousand men and woman, fired with the zeal of holiness, fortified with eternal faith in the Lord, and nerved to lion's courage by their sympathy for the poor and the fallen and the downtrodden, will go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of social raising-up -- the gospel of equality. (Letters, p. 41)

As the end of his life was drawing near and he could see his "machinery", the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, in good working order, Swamiji gradually began to withdraw his mind from the monumental task he had undertaken. He remembered how, many years earlier, Sri Ramakrishna, on his deathbed, drew him aside and empowered him to work for the welfare of mankind, to be released from his burden only when his work was completed. Referring to this incident, he told one of his disciples:

My son, there is no rest for me. That which Sri Ramakrishna called "Kali" took possession of my body three or four days before his passing away. That makes me work and work and never lets me keep still or look to my personal comforts. (Vivekananda: A Biography, p. 322)

Now that Swamiji's life was nearing its conclusion, and his work was finished, he began to feel that longed-for release, promised him by his beloved guru. He wrote to his dear friend Josephine MacCleod:

After all Joe, I am only the boy who used to listen to the wonderful words of Ramakrishna under the banyan at Dakshineswar. That is my true nature; work and activities, doing good and so forth are all superimpositions. Now I again hear his voice; that same old voice thrilling my soul. Bonds are breaking_love dying, work becoming tasteless. . . (Letters, p. 422)

Swamiji's legacy to the world was a new vision of spiritual life and pursuit. As the motto for the Ramakrishna Math and Mission which he established, he chose the words *atmano mokartha jagaddhitaya ca*, "for one's own liberation and for the welfare of the world". However, for his nearest and dearest, his brother disciples and his own disciples, he had a higher message:

This is the test, he who is Ramakrishna's child does not seek his personal good. . . There is no time to care for name or fame, or Mukti, or Bhakti. (Letters, p. 102)

Seek the salvation of others if you want to reach the highest! Kill out the desire for personal Mukti. That is the greatest of all spiritual disciplines. (The Life, II. 426)

The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted -- let these be your God. Know that service to these alone is the highest religion. (Letters, p. 94)