# The Heart of Celebration

Analyzing joy is interesting. The essential nature of life is joy. Just living is a matter of joy. According to the scriptures, the pure consciousness that we are, enmeshed in the nervous system wiring of our body-brain-mind complex, expresses itself as a living entity, a life. Consciousness is of the very nature of existence and bliss. Since our source is ananda, bliss itself, the body-mind complex should naturally exude the inherent bliss. No question about that! But is this a fact of our experience?

Most of us need happiness triggers, cues and gadgets to get on with our lives! Once beyond twenty, many even need constant human support encouragement to carry on with their life. This is so because our default or natural state is not very comfortable. The mind feels like a jail. Too many unpleasant things within, resulting in boredom and tiredness. When people say they are tired of life, they are actually tired of their minds! A negative mind can never give a positive experience of life. So escaping from ourselves has become normal. We need to escape from the moroseness and inner emptiness, so we need people and pleasures. Today's social media networks are programmed to function as short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that cater to our constant need for attention and appreciation. In other words, they capitalize on our weaknesses. Finally the user can become a mass of addictions.

Bliss is so natural to human life, but once it gets enclosed, ensnared by our ignorance, we must necessarily search for it in others. Thus our dependency coefficient is ever on the rise. We use networks and people mainly to escape our loneliness and depression.

It was to minimize these self-created problems, that we in the past, were given a scheme of life based on self-discipline and inner freedom. Our cultural basis is rooted in ideas like pratyasha hinata which is non-expectation and aparigraha nonacceptance of gifts. Practice of these guaranteed inner independence. It was always urged, and this may seem strange in today's society, that one should be a giver and never a receiver, if one would live happily. So do not accept gifts! Psychologically, such predispositions undermined the social self, which feeds only on opinions and complements. Our sense of ourselves is actually quite independent from others perceptions of ourselves. But to come to this originally, one must have Self-knowledge and the understanding of the self (ego) and its ramifications.

Sometimes we overestimate our problems while underestimating ourselves. The social self grows with positive feed and diminishes with negative feed. Such a frail sense of oneself, based on the opinions of others, is actually debasing. But that is about the only thing most people today live with and value.

However, this is not to mean, that social connections are not important. In fact, it is only by contributing to something bigger than oneself, the greater good, that we can proceed with our lives. But it is about 'contributing', not 'extracting'. Extracting can be very exacting. Real world applications of spiritual truths are more than just important. But basing one's

sense of oneself on others in totally uncalled for. A vital ingredient in growing up is this inner independence. To assert that one can be happy and joyous by oneself, ought to be considered the hallmark of maturity.

Helpless dependence on others for one's balance and well-being, what is usually called love, is actually something pathetic. It borders on neurosis. In our distressing mood, we do not realize that the people from whom we expect happiness, whom we are depending upon, are also distressed themselves. So the need happens to be mutual. As such the exchange of affection, is also mutual. Without inner growth, exchange and barter will characterize all relationships. Thus the fact is, we are all begging of beggars!

Sri Ramakrishna gives a very interesting story to illustrate this phenomenon. Once a fakir went to Emperor Akbar to ask for money. The emperor was saying his prayers. He prayed, "O Lord, give me money; give me wealth." The fakir started to leave the palace, but the emperor motioned to him to wait. After finishing his prayers, Akbar came to the holy man and said, "Why were you going away?" The fakir replied, "You yourself were begging for money and wealth, so I thought that if I must beg, I would beg of God and not of a beggar."

That is why studying happiness is important. We tend to devalue whatever is hazy to us. If happiness itself becomes a hazy concept in our head, rather than a living experience of our lives, we will undervalue it and make it an abstract something. The whole problem lies in clarity.

Our philosophy of life emerges from our understanding of happiness. Albert Schweitzer once said, "Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory."

To become independent of circumstances, means and people is to guarantee uncaused, self-sustained joy. In fact this is the purpose of yoga, to make us completely self-sufficient. This was a law which the Buddha gave us a very long time back. He said, "Stop expecting from others!" There is so much in that one sentence. It simply means joy and love are mechanisms that begin with us. They are supposed to occur in our system. In other words the 'other' is meant to share and reflect our joy. The 'other' is not a means to mine and extract joy. Nor will we succeed in making anyone a means to our selfish ends! For this is not what the human being is about. This simple law of life will save us a lot of trouble from investing our energies in wrong directions.

There are simple steps that modern psychology offers, to increase the frequency and augment our states of positivity:

The fact of non-appreciation is the most common cause for the reign of negativity in our minds. Often, people are heedless and unperceptive of the great blessings in their lives. They are never thankful for it! In fact, they tend to recognize them only when things go wrong! In other words, we take the bounties of our lives for granted.

If we only make appreciation and thankfulness a daily practice, our minds would bloom with positive emotions. The technique is simple, the effect is great.

Then there are those who are master depreciators! They find it impossible to appreciate and flawlessly find flaws and holes in everything. Their minds get into the most depressive moods and swings that

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one can imagine. To be able to simply respect and celebrate the joys of life is one of the blessed attributes of the virtuous minded.

Another simple technique is to offer gratitude at every possible chance. Gratefulness is a quality that ensures positivity. A grateful, appreciative mind and heart, and the same expressed in speech, is one of the best ways to celebrate life.

Critics are usually mourners who have sidelined the sheer goodness of life. Unhealthy and vicious criticism is born of jealousy. Such irresponsible people punish themselves enormously by constantly suffering negativity.

Exercise is another great mood-changer. It ushers happy states of mind. Physical exercise can simply lift our mood. Mental exercise can change the recurrent thought patterns of the brain. Daily exercise, in addition to keeping body-mind active, is a great way to keeping healthy and happy.

Eating healthy is the next simple way to take charge of your happiness. Some forms of food have the ability to calm the system; some can make it very restless or heavy. A *sattvic* diet ensures great energy, both physical and psychic.

What we take in through our mouth is food, but so also is that which we take in through the other senses. That is also food for the mind. What we consume through our senses, creates our thought patterns! Everything is not edible, yet it can be eaten. This is what we do when we consume unpalatable sense objects, which cause riot in our mind. A person who is used to stale food may lose taste for fresh food! And this is the case with many minds. We can, of course, generate as much unhappiness as we wish in our system!

Pratipaksha bhavana is a method recommended in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras for maintaining positivity in the mind. Patanjali recommends that every negative emotion, like a spurt of anger or hatred, be consiously substituted with a positive one. If one's intent is clean, one is easily able to do this. When anger arises, one can practice smiling and speaking sweet words, so that the mind gets time to analyze the situation rather than just explode. This is an example for pratipaksha bhavana, consciously changing the emotional state of one's mind. Patanjali is explicit in mentioning that if one maintains good behaviour even in the face of negativity, one will be filled with peace and happiness. The fourfold responses of maitri, karuna, mudita and upeksha mean friendliness towards all, compassion for the suffering, being happy with the joyous and indifference towards the wicked, respectively. They clearly show that one must remain positive no matter how disturbed the person in front is.

But positivity alone does not ensure deep level happiness. It is higher awareness that ensures it. And this is possible only through meditation and Self-Knowledge. Thus the actual fulfilment of life lies in spiritual realization. It is for this reason that Indian culture has given precedence to spiritual striving and practice, over and above even philosophy. In fact, the philosophies of Yoga and Vedanta were born of spiritual insight and not mere thinking. That is why they are darshanas.

The Upanishads offer sharp pointers to the human enigma of seeking happiness in the wrong objects. They are explicit in stating, that a mind alienated from the knowledge of its source will not find happiness, try as it may. After grazing

through the relatively positive experiences of comfort, security and positive emotions, it still hungers for fulfilling happiness. This is the existential urge that drives one to spiritual life and striving. When one is bored with the good and the noble, when one is through with all that the world can offer, one seeks the Lord who resides as the Self in all beings.

An interesting story in the Chandogya Upanisad points to this development in man's spiritual evolution. Narada was a sage who had performed great austerities and earned the title of 'Devarishi.' He had deep devotion to the Supreme Lord and was also endowed with vast learning of the scriptures. But he was ignorant of the Self. He yearned for peace and inner bliss, but did not know how to get it. So he went to the sage Sanatkumara, who was a knower of Brahman, and asked for the knowledge of the Self. He frankly told Sanatkumara all that he had learnt and knew, and yet none of these could appease his heart. He was still restless and unsatisfied. Sanatkumara finding him to be an able pupil, gave him the highest knowledge. First, he was given instructions on the sattvic life, meditation, how to raise his mind, and finally on the nature of the Self. Sanatkumara described the Infinite Self: "The Infinite is bliss. There is no bliss in anything that is finite. The Infinite is where one sees nothing, hears nothing, understands nothing else. It is the immortal, unchanging One, the Self, which is Infinite."

Narada asked Sanatkumara, "Sir, in what does the Infinite find support?" Sanatkumara replied, "Sve mahimni—In its own greatness." Nothing is required to know the unknowable; no prop is required to recognize and stabilize it. In fact, Brahman is the ultimate prop of the

universe. Knowing Him one finds the highest happiness possible in the human experience.

When little children laugh and play, they create a divine atmosphere which is palpable. The transparent beauty of nature stills the mind. Deep absorption in an artwork or a game or research, results in the spontaneous engagement of the mind, and one transcends time and space. Whenever joy has arisen, it is a welling up from within. It is only then that the word 'celebration' would hold meaning, if its origin is from oneself. Sri Ramakrishna's life is a living demonstration of perennial selfgenerated, self-sustaining joy. He also gives a simple means to tackle suffering. Sri Ramakrishna once told Holy Mother, "He who utters the name of God never suffers from any misery." There are means to enhance joy and eradicate the habitual suffering and boredom of our minds.

Every act of love, service and empathy expresses the divinity in the human heart and hence is worth celebrating. The place where God's name is sung and worshipped, exudes divine joy. This is the great blessing of sacred and consecrated spaces. Here the heart naturally sings in celebration, when joy wells up from within. Celebrations are joyous occasions for refreshing memories and coming together.

The year 2020 marks an important milestone for Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, New Delhi. It is the Golden jubilee year of the Delhi branch centre of Sri Sarada Math. This is the home of Samvit. Samvit began its journey of spreading the light of knowledge in the holy precincts of this institution. We invite all readers to join us in the celebrations and make the events memorable! \*\*

# Celebrating the 125th year of Swami Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religions

PRAVRAJIKA JNANADAPRANA

ot too long ago we celebrated the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's memorable speech, delivered in the World Parliament of Religions, held at Chicago, on September 11, 1893. We are not aware of a speech by any other person having been commemorated like this. What, therefore, is so unique about Swamiji's speech?

Vivekananda himself said, "I have a message for the West, as Buddha had a message for the East." These 'messages' are not mere words. Behind them are the lives of great men. Behind Swamiji's message are the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, combined as a single unit. Sister Nivedita aptly says, "There lived amongst us One Soul — 'Ramakrishna-Vivekananda' which manifested through two bodies.

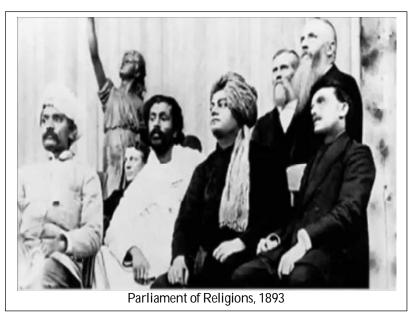
Sri Ramakrishna was born in a remote village of Bengal in 1836. By that time the West was making rapid advances into the modern age of scientific enquiry. Due to the progress in science, the prevalent religious beliefs, dogmas, and doctrines were already losing ground. Even in the East, where the influence of science was felt, religion was losing its importance. In this global scenario, Sri Ramakrishna, with no formal education, was appointed as a priest in the Kali temple at Dakshineshwar near Kolkata. But Sri Ramakrishna was not an ordinary priest; he had a questioning mind and a scientific outlook. He was an ardent seeker of Truth and never believed anything blindly. He wanted to know whether the Divine Mother, whom he was supposed to worship in the stone image, was indeed present in that image. Because if She was not, then the worship of a mere stone image was worthless. This longing to know the Truth was so intense in him, that he forgot food and sleep — he lost awareness of even his body. In that state, he realized that consciousness pervaded not only the image, but the puja utensils, the floor, and everything about him; just as he himself was pervaded — in fact, he understood that the whole universe was pervaded by one single Consciousness, and that is the Reality. His encompassing of all in the One was evident, even as he felt the pain of the grass when anyone walked over it. Much later, scientists corroborated this assertion when the quantum theory was put forward. Ramakrishna did not stop there. He undertook, one by one, the religious practices of different sects — Shakta (Tantric), Vaishnava, and Advaita Vedanta. He then practised Islam and Christianity and got the same result: The One is expressed or manifested in different forms — Kali, Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed and Christ. And he found that each path leads to that One Ultimate Truth.

To Sri Ramakrishna came Narendranath, the future Swami Vivekananda — a young man of Kolkata, educated in the Western stream. He was intensely eager to know whether anybody had seen God. When he asked Sri Ramakrishna this question, "Have you seen God?" he got the answer in the affirmative. Not only that, Sri Ramakrishna was ready

to show him too, if he was interested. Narendranath went on to become his chief disciple and he too could experience the Universal Oneness of existence. Thus, their message is: all religions are only different paths leading to the same goal, that is, everything is pervaded by One single consciousness and science and religion are

discoveries and technology for the benefit of mankind. But they remained dissatisfied. They were waiting for spiritual fulfilment.

Swamiji compared the advent of Sri Ramakrishna to a huge tidal wave. He said, "A huge tidal wave is coming that will flood the whole world." When he appeared in the Parliament of Religions and addressed



not antagonistic but complemen-tary; the aim of human life is to be aware of this Oneness. This awareness alone can solve all problems —personal, social, national and international, and bring peace and harmony in the world.

## The Message for the West

To convey this message, Swamiji went to the West. Why to the West? Because people in the West were ready to receive this message. They were already enjoying material prosperity, physical comforts, mental freedom, and intellectual achievements. They were already contributing the fruits of their scientific

the audience as, "Sisters and Brothers of America" that tidal wave dashed against the shores of America, and engulfed and overwhelmed the audience with its spiritual power. And they responded as One, as everyone stood up, giving a standing ovation for two minutes! The audience consisting of more than 5000 men and women were all different. But as spirits or shall we say, as Atman, they were all the same. Swamiji's words made them momentarily conscious of this Oneness of the Atman — their true nature and they experienced an unspeakable sense of joyful bliss. This experience, although momentary, could never be forgotten. The rest is history. Vivekananda spoke a few more

times at the Parliament. After that, he travelled widely and kept sharing his most profound thoughts with rapt audiences. After hearing him, the West could never be the same. That is why Vedanta Societies were established, books on the four yogas — Jnana, Bhakti, Raja, and Karma were published and read widely. Several men and women dedicated their lives for the cause of Vedanta and for Swamiji's work in India — the Leggetts, Miss Macleod, Mrs. Ole Bull, Miss Waldo, Sister Christine, the Seviers and Sister Nivedita, to name just a few. Today we know that Comparative Religion, Yoga, and Vedanta are studied in colleges and universities, meditation is practised, and interfaith dialogues are held. Indian teachers and gurus are in great demand.

#### The Message for India

What about India? Between 1890 and 1893, Swamiji had wandered throughout the country and had seen with his own eyes the pitiable condition of the poor, the downtrodden masses lacking the means to earn their livelihood, half-starved, bereft of education, and unable to stand on their own feet. Sri Ramakrishna would say, religion is not for an empty stomach. The masses needed to be fed and educated. And what about the condition of the minority of the educated — the English-educated Indians at that time? They were suffering from an inferiority complex. The British rulers had indoctrinated that their religion — Hinduism was primitive with its idolatry; the social customs were meaningless and full of superstitions, and so on.

This English-educated class of Indians needed a sense of self-respect, a

sense of national pride, knowledge of their past history, culture, and heritage. Swamiji's speech in Chicago and the news of his success there reached India and awakened his countrymen. They regained self-respect and self-confidence; they felt the need to throw off the shackles of foreign rule. With the sense of patriotism being awakened, the freedom movement gained momentum. A few of them, inspired by Swamiji, dedicated themselves to uplift the downtrodden and the women. The masses, on the other hand, so long steeped in tamas, wrapped in inertia and lethargy started waking up; moving up to rajas, they became active with rajo guna mixed with tamo guna. Many of these people became impatient to enjoy life at the physical level. That also led to greed, selfishness, and corruption.

The enlightened minority, as individuals or in groups have since been rendering service providing, characterbuilding education to the needy and such other welfare activities. This service in a spirit of worship was introduced by Swamiji, as hinted by Sri Ramakrishna, *Shiva Jnane Jiva Seva* (serve all beings knowing them to be God; service of God in man)

Swamiji said, "I will go on inspiring people till the whole world comes to know that it is one with God." He predicted that *rishis* will walk in every street, in every city. These *rishis* would not be mendicants meditating in caves. Men in every walk of life will be aware of their divinity. These *rishis*, the modern-day scientists and artists, engineers and doctors, lawyers and housewives, farmers and labourers, and businessmen, will all manifest their inner divinity in their daily lives. That is the aim of religion, the aim of human life. As Sister

Nivedita puts it, "All human activities are sacred, nothing secular; life is itself religion and religion is realization — the experience of the One appearing as many." That is to be achieved through the performance of the daily duties with all sincerity, unselfishness, love, and devotion. This is Practical Vedanta. Thus religion is redefined. The era of narrow, sectarian religions is over.

Swamiji's speech thus ushered in a new era of human civilization in which the universal Vedantic ideals of spirituality are well-accepted everywhere. Thus, all religious ideals will be broadened and enriched and remain relevant in this Age.

Humanity, holding on to the moral and ethical values to produce morally ideal human beings has now to adopt spiritual values to raise itself to the divine level where men and women will manifest the divinity already within them. This is the ultimate goal of religion and of human life.

It is, therefore, most appropriate and relevant to commemorate Swami Vivekananda's epic speech at the Parliament of Religions in 1893...not just to honour him but to re-orient our views of spirituality and human life and make ourselves open to this new age of spiritual values.



"I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood; which is everyday repeated by millions of human beings: As the different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee."

— Swami Vivekananda

There is a song written by Rabindranath Tagore. It is a prayer, "O God, Thou art the pole star of my life, so in this ocean of life, my direction will never be lost.... In the depth of my consciousness I feel your Presence. Even when there is doubt... you are my eternal companion...." Swami Vivekananda was very fond of this song and he sang it to Sri Ramakrishna.

What Vedanta seeks to achieve can be illustrated from certain passages from the Upanishads. These ancient scriptures of India primarily discuss the spiritual problems of man. Usually man is not aware of his spiritual nature. At the back of this material reality, there is a spiritual reality. As long as the basic ignorance of the spiritual reality lasts, we are covered by the veils of *Maya*. So Vedanta seeks to teach how man can find this spiritual reality at the back of things. In each Upanishad, this question is asked and answered. I will take just a few of these questions and answers, the different levels of this search.

### Teachings of the Upanishads

In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, a student who has studied many years and has not found peace, comes to the teacher and asks, "How can I obtain peace?" The search is the search for peace. When the roof of my house leaks, the roofer comes and fixes it. Then I have peace. But that is not a lasting peace. Something or the other always breaks and needs repairs! Therefore, every moment of the day our peace can be disturbed, if we have not

learned to find inner equilibrium. Without it, we are not stable. A young couple marries and they think they will be happy forever. But something happens and the marriage ends. Our life here is very unstable unless we have been able to find spiritual strength within. That cannot come from any worldly or intellectual thing. The student could not find peace in his books. The teacher tells him, "Peace is not in books." The teacher then begins to teach him how to find peace. We cannot find peace until we go to the depth of things. We must learn the secret of going to the core of things. Go to the core of your mind and heart, there is peace. On the surface, man is seeking fragmented remedies. We are always drawing blueprints for our life, seeking peace: "If I can only go to another locality. If I can only get a better job." If we are interested in real peace, we have to go to the spiritual level: Shantam, which is the source of peace. This is one kind of search

There is also another basic search. That is the quest for knowledge. This is talked about in many Upanishads, but here I mention the *Mundaka Upanishad*. A group of students come to a teacher and tell him they are tired of seeking knowledge. They want that One knowledge that can open the door to all knowledge. The teacher says, "Yes, if you are prepared to be patient, I can tell you about a knowledge which will satisfy your desire for knowledge." This is called *Atmavidya*. This Upanishad speaks of that unitary knowledge; the knowledge of the True

Self, which unifies all knowledge. The word Vedanta means supreme knowledge, which unifies all knowledge.

In one chapter of the Upanishad, the rishi speaks of the search for Truth. We are all continually seeking Truth. When we know that everything is changing, we are alarmed. We want stability. In our experience, that is called Truth. The Vedantic definition of Truth is, that which does not change. This search for Truth is a basic search of the human heart. We are always examining things to see if a thing is true. Take for example, meditation. If we have an experience where our mind goes to another level, we immediately ask our friends, seeking confirmation: "Is this experience true, or just imagination?" When we meet someone for the first time, and the person is very nice to us, we ask ourselves, "What does he want?" Doubt is a natural trait of our mind. Without it. we would be continually deceived, if that power of doubting were not there. The fact that we doubt shows that we are constantly seeking Truth, and our mind tells us that it is not to be found here, in this outer world. Whereas in our practical, or day-to-day life, our search for truth is related to these normal affairs of life.

This same search has to be raised to the spiritual level. Consider a person who has been frustrated in every way: his wife has died, his children are gone, and on top of that his office co-workers are against him. Swami Vivekananda wrote a poem, "Angels Unawares" showing that suffering can lead to the Truth. Nobody wants suffering, but it may lead us to Truth! Painful experiences can be the "angels unawares". When everything has failed us, then we will ask, "Is there something that will not fail me?" Then we may then begin

the search for truth.

In the Chandogya Upanishad we find a dialogue between father and son. The son has studied for 12 years and is very proud of himself. His father, a man of knowledge, asks, "My boy, you have studied so many things, but have you studied something which is really unchanging, that which does not change?" So the father leads the boy towards the Truth. This whole universe has come from that Unchanging Reality. The father tells his son that if he is interested he can find that Truth in the depth of his own personality. You are that Truth, Tat Tvam Asi, That Thou Art. In the depth of your personality, there is your own True Self. Sometimes you call it God, but really, if you want Truth, you have to grab your Self — don't try to grab what is outside of yourself. You have to stand on that True Self. That is the essence of the search for Truth

All these different searches culminate in the realization of the great Truth. This is described in the Katha Upanishad. A young boy comes to a teacher and asks this question, "What is man? He struggles and then the curtain drops and he has to leave the scene, so what is this tragedy?" He is frustrated. The boy asks this question of Yama, the god of death. Yama tells the boy, Nachiketa, "If man can discover himself, then he will know that even though his body, mind, life can go, still his True Self, Atman, can never go." If we can have knowledge of our True Self, we will really know what we are. We are not just what can be seen. Every moment we are pure Being, that eternal Truth, that eternal peace, eternal knowledge, and eternal happiness. We are the Unchanging Reality, so all these basic searches converge into ourselves. The Upanishads boldly proclaim, "If you can find yourself, you will find everything." The basic search in Vedanta is the search for the Self. We are always trying to find ourselves, but in a confused manner. This ignorance is so deeply embedded that we don't want to dive deep. We should first examine whether we really want peace. Then only can we try to come to our Self and discover the basic truth, to know the True Self.

Obese people may take a pill so that they have no desire to eat. Something like that happens. If we can attain the ultimate knowledge of the Self, we will lose our appetite for this little knowledge. Then we will know, "I was never born and I will never die." Knowledge means feeling one's constant identity with that Truth. Many have realized that Truth of the Atman. At the end of *Katha Upanishad* it says that Nachiketa attained this knowledge. It is

our universal heritage. The search in Vedanta is the search for our True Self. This is really the highest level of God. There are many levels of God, but the highest level is our True Self. If we can find this, we do not need any other God.

There are several bold statements in these Upanishads, such as 'You are that God creating this Universe.' 'This whole Universe is in you.' 'It is all projection of your True Self.' It is fascinating to read but difficult to follow. We want so many things, but do not want the most precious thing, namely, the Self. Vedanta seeks to bring us the methods of attaining Self-Knowledge and it is the highest religion. Religion, on the surface, has to do with faith, ritual, belief system, and so on but Self-Knowledge is true knowledge and the highest goal of religion according to Indian spiritual heritage and thought. 樂



In one word, the ideal of Vedanta is to know man as he really is, and this is its message, that if you cannot worship your brother, the manifested God, how can you worship a God who is unmanifest?

— Swami Vivekananda