

Swami Vivekananda, Unity in Diversity - excerpted from a talk delivered in London, November 3, 1896 - in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2, Jnana-yoga, accessed on WikiSource

How are we to see the One? This mind, so deluded, so weak, so easily led, even this mind can be strong and may catch a glimpse of that knowledge, that Oneness, which saves us from dying again and again. As rain falling upon a mountain flows in various streams down the sides of the mountain, so all the energies which you see here are from that one Unit. It has become manifold falling upon Maya. Do not run after the manifold; go towards the One.

"He is in all that moves; He is in all that is pure; He fills the universe; He is in the sacrifice; He is the guest in the house; He is in man, in water, in animals, in truth; He is the Great One. As fire coming into this world is manifesting itself in various forms, even so, that one Soul of the universe is manifesting Himself in all these various forms. As air coming into this universe manifests itself in various forms, even so, the One Soul of all souls, of all beings, is manifesting Himself in all forms."

This is true for you when you have understood this Unity, and not before. Then is all optimism, because He is seen everywhere. The question is that if all this be true that that Pure One — the Self, the Infinite — has entered all this, how is it that He suffers, how is it that He becomes miserable, impure? He does not, says the Upanishad.

"As the sun is the cause of the eyesight of every being, yet is not made defective by the defect in any eye, even so the Self of all is not affected by the miseries of the body, or by any misery that is around you."

I may have some disease and see everything yellow, but the sun is not affected by it.

"He is the One, the Creator of all, the Ruler of all, the Internal Soul of every being — He who makes His Oneness manifold. Thus sages who realize Him as the Soul of their souls, unto them belongs eternal peace; unto none else, unto none else. He who in this world of evanescence finds Him who never changes, he who in this universe of death finds that One Life, he who in this manifold finds that Oneness, and all those who realize Him as the Soul of their souls, to them belongs eternal peace; unto none else, unto none else. Where to find Him in the external world, where to find Him in the suns, and moons, and stars? There the sun cannot illumine, nor the moon, nor the stars, the flash of lightning cannot illumine the place; what to speak of this mortal fire? He is shining, everything else shines. It is His light that they have borrowed, and He is shining through them."

Here is another beautiful simile. Those of you who have been in India and have seen how the banyan tree comes from one root and spreads itself far around, will understand this. He is that banyan tree; He is the root of all and has branched out until He has become this universe, and however far He extends, every one of these trunks and branches is connected.

Various heavens are spoken of in the Brâhmana portions of the Vedas, but the philosophical teaching of the Upanishads gives up the idea of going to heaven. Happiness is not in this heaven or in that heaven, it is in the soul; places do not signify anything. Here is another passage which shows the different states of realisation:

"In the heaven of the forefathers, as a man sees things in a dream, so the Real Truth is seen."

As in dreams we see things hazy and not so distinct, so we see the Reality there. There is another heaven called the Gandharva, in which it is still less clear; as a man sees his own reflection in the water, so is the Reality seen there. The highest heaven, of which the Hindus conceive is called the Brahmaloaka; and in this, the Truth is seen much more clearly, like light and shade, but not yet quite distinctly. But as a man sees his own face in a mirror, perfect, distinct, and clear, so is the Truth shining in the soul of man. The highest heaven, therefore, is in our own souls; the greatest temple of worship is the human soul, greater than all heavens, says the Vedanta; for in no heaven anywhere, can we understand the reality as distinctly and clearly as in this life, in our own soul. Changing places does not help one much. I thought while I was in India that the cave would give me clearer vision. I found it was not so. Then I thought the forest would do so, then, Varanasi. But the same difficulty existed everywhere, because we make our own worlds. If I am evil, the whole world is evil to me. That is what the Upanishad says. And the same thing applies to all worlds. If I die and go to heaven, I should find the same, for until I am pure it is no use going to caves, or forests, or to Varanasi, or to heaven, and if I have polished my mirror, it does not matter where I live, I get the Reality just as It is. So it is useless, running hither and thither, and spending energy in vain, which should be spent only in polishing the mirror. The same idea is expressed again:

"None sees Him, none sees His form with the eyes. It is in the mind, in the pure mind, that He is seen, and this immortality is gained."

From **Vivekananda: A Biography**, Swami Nikhilananda (1953)

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, the great soul loved and revered in East and West alike as the rejuvenator of Hinduism in India and the preacher of its eternal truths abroad, was born at 6:49, a few minutes after sunrise, on Monday, January 12, 1863. It was the day of the great Hindu festival Makarasamkrānti, when special worship is offered to the Ganges by millions of devotees. Thus the future Vivekananda first drew breath when the air above the sacred river not far from the house was reverberating with the prayers, worship, and religious music of thousands of Hindu men and women.

While Vivekananda was still in his mother's womb, she, like many other pious Hindu mothers, had observed religious vows, fasted, and prayed so that she might be blessed with a son who would do honour to the family. She requested a relative who was living in Benares to offer special worship to the Vireśwara Śiva of that holy place and seek His blessings; for Śiva, the great god of renunciation, dominated her thought. One night she dreamt that this supreme Deity aroused Himself from His meditation and agreed to be born as her son. When she woke she was filled with joy.

The mother, Bhuvaneswari Devi, accepted the child as a boon from Vireśwara Śiva and named him Vireśwara. The family, however, gave him the name of Narendranath Datta, calling him, for short, Narendra, or more endearingly, Naren.

The Datta family of Calcutta, into which Narendranath had been born, was well known for its affluence, philanthropy, scholarship, and independent spirit. The grandfather, Durgacharan, after the birth of his first son, had renounced the world in search of God. The father, Viswanath, an attorney-at-law of the High Court of Calcutta, was versed in English and Persian literature and often entertained himself and his friends by reciting from the Bible and the poetry of Hafiz, both of which, he believed, contained truths unmatched by human thinking elsewhere. He was particularly attracted to the Islāmic culture, with which he was familiar because of his close contact with the educated Moslems of Northwestern India. Moreover, he derived a large income from his law practice and, unlike his father, thoroughly enjoyed the worldly life. An expert in cookery, he prepared rare dishes and liked to share them with his friends. Travel was another of his hobbies. Though agnostic in religion and a mocker of social conventions, he possessed a large heart and often went out of his way to support idle relatives, some of whom were given to drunkenness. Once, when Narendra protested against this lack of judgement, his father said: "How can you understand the great misery of human life? When you realize the depths of men's suffering, you will sympathize with these unfortunate creatures who try to forget their sorrows, even though only for a short while, in the oblivion created by intoxicating drink." Naren's father, however, kept a sharp eye on his children and would not tolerate the slightest deviation from good manners.

Bhuvaneswari Devi, the mother, was cast in a different mould. Regal in appearance and gracious in conduct, she belonged to the old tradition of Hindu womanhood. As mistress of a

large household, she devoted her spare time to sewing and singing, being particularly fond of the great Indian epics, the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, large portions of which she had memorized. She became the special refuge of the poor, and commanded universal respect because of her calm resignation to God, her inner tranquillity, and her dignified detachment in the midst of her many arduous duties. Two sons were born to her besides Narendranath, and four daughters, two of whom died at an early age.

Narendra grew up to be a sweet, sunny-tempered, but very restless boy. Two nurses were necessary to keep his exuberant energy under control, and he was a great tease to his sisters. In order to quiet him, the mother often put his head under the cold-water tap, repeating Śiva's name, which always produced the desired effect. Naren felt a child's love of birds and animals, and this characteristic reappeared during the last days of his life. Among his boyhood pets were a family cow, a monkey, a goat, a peacock, and several pigeons and guinea-pigs. The coachman of the family, with his turban, whip, and bright-coloured livery, was his boyhood ideal of a magnificent person, and he often expressed the ambition to be like him when he grew up.

Narendra bore a striking resemblance to the grandfather who had renounced the world to lead a monastic life, and many thought that the latter had been reborn in him. The youngster developed a special fancy for wandering monks, whose very sight would greatly excite him. One day when such a monk appeared at the door and asked for alms, Narendra gave him his only possession, the tiny piece of new cloth that was wrapped round his waist. Thereafter, whenever a monk was seen in the neighbourhood, Narendra would be locked in a room. But even then he would throw out of the window whatever he found near at hand as an offering to the holy man. In the meantime, he was receiving his early education from his mother, who taught him the Bengali alphabet and his first English words, as well as stories from the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata.

During his childhood Narendra, like many other Hindu children of his age, developed a love for the Hindu deities, of whom he had learnt from his mother. Particularly attracted by the heroic story of Rāma and his faithful consort Sitā, he procured their images, bedecked them with flowers, and worshipped them in his boyish fashion. But disillusionment came when he heard someone denounce marriage vehemently as a terrible bondage. When he had thought this over he discarded Rāma and Sitā as unworthy of worship. In their place he installed the image of Śiva, the god of renunciation, who was the ideal of the yogis. Nevertheless he retained a fondness for the Rāmāyana.

At this time he daily experienced a strange vision when he was about to fall asleep. Closing his eyes, he would see between his eyebrows a ball of light of changing colours, which would slowly expand and at last burst, bathing his whole body in a white radiance. Watching this light he would gradually fall asleep. Since it was a daily occurrence, he regarded the phenomenon as common to all people, and was surprised when a friend denied ever having seen such a thing. Years later, however, Narendra's spiritual teacher, Śri Ramakrishna, said to him, "Naren, my boy, do you see a light when you go to sleep?" Ramakrishna knew that such a vision

indicated a great spiritual past and an inborn habit of meditation. The vision of light remained with Narendra until the end of his life, though later it lost its regularity and intensity.

While still a child Narendra practised meditation with a friend before the image of Śiva. He had heard that the holy men of ancient India would become so absorbed in contemplation of God that their hair would grow and gradually enter into the earth, like the roots of the banyan tree. While meditating, therefore, he would open his eyes, now and then, to see if his own hair had entered into the earth. Even so, during meditation, he often became unconscious of the world. On one occasion he saw in a vision a luminous person of serene countenance who was carrying the staff and water-bowl of a monk. The apparition was about to say something when Naren became frightened and left the room. He thought later that perhaps this had been a vision of Buddha.

At the age of six he was sent to a primary school. One day, however, he repeated at home some of the vulgar words that he had learnt from his classmates, whereupon his disgusted parents took him out of the school and appointed a private tutor, who conducted classes for him and some other children of the neighbourhood in the worship hall of the house. Naren soon showed a precocious mind and developed a keen memory. Very easily he learnt by heart the whole of a Sanskrit grammar and long passages from the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata. Some of the friendships he made at this age lasted his whole lifetime. At school he was the undisputed leader. When playing his favourite game of “King and the Court,” he would assume the rôle of the monarch and assign to his friends the parts of the ministers, commander-in-chief, and other state officials.

He was marked from birth to be a leader of men, as his name Narendra (lord of men) signified, yet even at that early age he could not tolerate caste arrogance. In his father’s office separate tobacco pipes were provided for clients belonging to the different castes, as orthodox Hindu custom required, and the pipe from which the Moslems smoked was set quite apart. Narendra once smoked tobacco from all the pipes, including the one marked for the Moslems, and when reprimanded, remarked, “I cannot see what difference it makes.”

During these early years, Narendra’s future personality was influenced by his gifted father and his saintly mother, both of whom kept a chastening eye upon him. The father had his own manner of discipline. For example, when, in the course of an argument with his mother, the impetuous boy once uttered a few rude words and the report came to the father, Viswanath did not directly scold his son, but wrote with charcoal on the door of his room: “Narendra today said to his mother—” and added the words that had been used. He wanted Narendra’s friends to know how rudely he had treated his mother.

Another time Narendra bluntly asked his father, “What have you done for me?”

Instead of being annoyed, Viswanath said, “Go and look at yourself in the mirror, and then you will know.”

Still another day, Narendra said to his father, “How shall I conduct myself in the world?” “Never show surprise at anything,” his father replied.

This priceless advice enabled Narendranath, in his future chequered life, to preserve his serenity of mind whether dwelling with princes in their palaces or sharing the straw huts of beggars.

The mother, Bhuvaneshwari, played her part in bringing out Narendranath's innate virtues. When he told her, one day, of having been unjustly treated in school, she said to him, in consolation: "My child, what does it matter, if you are in the right? Always follow the truth without caring about the result. Very often you may have to suffer injustice or unpleasant consequences for holding to the truth; but you must not, under any circumstances, abandon it." Many years later Narendranath proudly said to an audience, "I am indebted to my mother for whatever knowledge I have acquired."

One day, when he was fighting with his play-fellows, Narendra accidentally fell from the porch and struck his forehead against a stone. The wound bled profusely and left a permanent scar over his right eye. Years later, when Ramakrishna heard of this accident, he remarked: "In a way it was a good thing. If he had not thus lost some of his blood, he would have created havoc in the world with his excessive energy."

In 1870, at the age of seven, Narendra entered high school. His exceptional intelligence was soon recognized by his teachers and classmates. Though at first reluctant to study English because of its foreign origin, he soon took it up with avidity. But the curriculum consumed very little of his time. He used most of his inexhaustible energy in outside activities. Games of various kinds, many of which he invented or improvised, kept him occupied. He made an imitation gas-works and a factory for aerating water, these two novelties having just been introduced in Calcutta. He organized an amateur theatrical company and a gymnasium, and took lessons in fencing, wrestling, rowing, and other manly sports. He also tried his hand at the art of cooking. Intensely restless, he would soon tire of one pastime and seek a new one. With his friends he visited the museums and the zoological garden. He arbitrated the disputes of his play-fellows and was a favourite with the people of the neighbourhood. Everybody admired his courage, straightforwardness, and simplicity.

From an early age this remarkable youth had no patience with fear or superstition. One of his boyish pranks had been to climb a flowering tree belonging to a neighbour, pluck the flowers, and do other mischief. The owner of the tree, finding his remonstrances unheeded, once solemnly told Naren's friends that the tree was guarded by a white-robed ghost who would certainly wring their necks if they disturbed his peace. The boys were frightened and kept away. But Narendra persuaded them to follow him back, and he climbed the tree, enjoying his usual measure of fun, and broke some branches by way of further mischief. Turning to his friends, he then said: "What asses you all are! See, my neck is still there. The old man's story is simply not true. Don't believe what others say unless you yourselves know it to be true."

These simple but bold words were an indication of his future message to the world. Addressing large audiences in later years, he would often say: "Do not believe in a thing because you have read about it in a book. Do not believe in a thing because another man has said it was

true. Do not believe in words because they are hallowed by tradition. Find out the truth for yourself. Reason it out. That is realization.”

The following incident illustrates his courage and presence of mind. He one day wished to set up a heavy trapeze in the gymnasium, and so asked the help of some people who were there. Among them was an English sailor. The trapeze fell and knocked the sailor unconscious, and the crowd, thinking him dead, ran away for fear of the police. But Naren tore a piece from his cloth, bandaged the sailor’s wound, washed his face with water, and gradually revived him. Then he moved the wounded man to a neighbouring schoolhouse where he nursed him for a week. When the sailor had recovered, Naren sent him away with a little purse collected from his friends.

All through this period of boyish play Narendra retained his admiration for the life of the wandering monk. Pointing to a certain line on the palm of his hand, he would say to his friends: “I shall certainly become a sannyāsin. A palmist has predicted it.”

ON THE THRESHOLD OF YOUTH

As Narendra grew into adolescence, his temperament showed a marked change. He became keen about intellectual matters, read serious books on history and literature, devoured newspapers, and attended public meetings. Music was his favourite pastime. He insisted that it should express a lofty idea and arouse the feelings of the musician.

At the age of fifteen he experienced his first spiritual ecstasy. The family was journeying to Raipur in the Central Provinces, and part of the trip had to be made in a bullock cart. On that particular day the air was crisp and clear; the trees and creepers were covered with green leaves and many-coloured blossoms; birds of brilliant plumage warbled in the woods. The cart was moving along a narrow pass where the lofty peaks rising on the two sides almost touched each other. Narendra’s eyes spied a large bee-hive in the cleft of a giant cliff, and suddenly his mind was filled with awe and reverence for the Divine Providence. He lost outer consciousness and lay thus in the cart for a long time. Even after returning to the sense-perceived world he radiated joy.

[Swami Nikhilananda. Vivekananda: A Biography. Ramakrishna Vivekanada Center. Kindle Edition.]