

INDIAN ICONS

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA



Swami Vivekananda was the most famous of the disciples of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. He founded the Ramakrishna mission to spread the teachings of his Guru throughout the world. One of the most famous and influential spiritual leaders of India, he sought to promote the philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga.

Swami Vivekananda was the first spiritual leader of India who introduced Hinduism, Yoga and Vedanta at the World's Parliament of Religions. Here we will read his biography to know more about Swami Vivekananda, his teachings and his life history.

His Early Life

Swami Vivekananda was born as Narendranath Dutta in Calcutta (now Kolkata), in the year 1863. Even as a child, Narendra showed a high level of intelligence and a deep inclination towards meditation. He joined Presidency College of Calcutta in 1879 for one year and then entered Scottish Church College to study philosophy. By this time, Narendra started questioning God and His presence. He also became a part of the Brahma Samaj, a religious movement. Unsatisfied with only congregational prayers and devotional songs, he started looking elsewhere to find answers to his questions.

Meeting Ramakrishna and Renunciation

His search led Narendra towards Ramakrishna, whom he met in November 1881. At first Narendra would not accept Ramakrishna as his teacher. He tested Ramakrishna in various ways and asked him many critical questions.

Ramakrishna also encouraged Narendranath and told him "Test me as the moneychangers test their coins. You must not believe me without testing me thoroughly. Narendra learned Ramakrishna considered "money" as a hindrance on the path of spirituality and could not tolerate the touch of silver coins (i.e. money).

To test this, one day when Ramakrishna was not in his room, Narendra put a silver coin under the mattress of his bed. Ramakrishna entered the room without knowing about Narendra's act, then sat on his bed. But immediately he jumped up in pain and asked someone to check his bed. The bed was searched and the coin was found. After testing Ramakrishna to his maximum limit, Narendra accepted him wholeheartedly as his Guru.

One day, Narendra requested Ramakrishna to pray to goddess [Kali](#), for some money, which was the immediate need of Datta family at the time. Ramakrishna asked him to go to the idol of Kali and ask for it himself. Following the suggestion, Narendra went to the temple of Kali at night and stood in front of the idol. He bowed to goddess Kali but forgot to pray for wealth. When Ramakrishna learned of this, he sent Narendra to pray one more time. Narendra went to the temple for the second time the same night to pray to goddess Kali, but, not for wealth or property. He prayed for "wisdom, discrimination, renunciation and Her uninterrupted vision". Then Ramakrishna realized that he had found a gem as a disciple.

Ramakrishna taught him that all living beings are manifestations of the Divine

He remained with Ramakrishna for a period of five years. After the death of his Guru, Narendra took his vows as a monk, renounced the world and became Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda thought of the Master in relation to India and the rest of the world. As the prophet of the present age, what was Sri Ramakrishna's message to the modern world and to India in particular? This question and the awareness of his own powers urged Swamiji to go out alone into the wide world.

So in the middle of 1890, after receiving the blessings of Sri Sarada Devi, the divine consort of Sri Ramakrishna, known to the world as Holy Mother, who was

then staying in Kolkata, Swamiji left Baranagar Math and embarked on a long journey of exploration and discovery of India. Vivekananda began a tour of India and eventually studied the conditions prevalent in Colonial India. He saw the plight of Indians under the colonial rule of the British Empire. Swami Vivekananda was deeply moved to see the appalling poverty and backwardness of the masses.

He was the first religious leader in India to understand and openly declare that the real cause of India's downfall was the neglect of the masses. The immediate need was to provide food and other bare necessities of life to the hungry millions.

For this, they should be taught improved methods of agriculture, village industries, etc. It was in this context that Vivekananda grasped the crux of the problem of poverty in India (which had escaped the attention of social reformers of his days): owing to centuries of oppression, the downtrodden masses had lost faith in their capacity to improve their lot.

It was first of all necessary to infuse into their minds faith in themselves. For this, they needed a life-giving, inspiring message. Swamiji found this message in the principle of the Atman, the doctrine of the potential divinity of the soul, taught in Vedanta, the ancient system of religious philosophy of India. He saw that, in spite of poverty, the masses clung to religion, but they had never been taught the life-giving, ennobling principles of Vedanta and how to apply them in practical life.

It was when these ideas were taking shape in his mind in the course of his wanderings that Swami Vivekananda heard about the World's Parliament of Religions to be held in Chicago in 1893. His friends and admirers in India wanted him to attend the Parliament. He too felt that the Parliament would provide the right forum to present his Master's message to the world, and so he decided to go to America.

Even though Swami Vivekananda was initially nervous of addressing the large international gathering of seven thousand people, he bowed to Goddess Sarasvati and began his speech by addressing all the gathered as "Sisters and brothers of America". Upon uttering these words, Vivekananda received a two minute standing ovation from the crowd.

He began his speech by greeting the youngest nation on behalf of "the most ancient order of monks in the world, the Vedic order of sanyasis, a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance". During his speech, Vivekananda also quoted from the "Shiva Mahimna Stotram" through which he explained that even though people use different paths to reach the divine, they all ultimately reach Him, irrespective of the path they had chosen.

Vivekananda's speech was received wonderfully by the parliament and Parliament President John Henry Barrows praised Vivekananda greatly and said that he had a great influence over the entire audience. Vivekananda also received massive attention in the press who called him the "cyclonic monk from India". Newspapers like the New York Herald wrote of him saying "Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation".

Following this successful and highly inspiring speech, Swami Vivekananda gave more speeches at the Parliament about Hinduism and Buddhism and peace and understanding between religions. All of Swami Vivekananda's speeches had a similar undertone, that of religious harmony and tolerance.

After his speech in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda toured the United States and gave lectures at New York, Detroit, Boston and Chicago. Later Swami Vivekananda also travelled to England and other European countries such as Germany. He was offered prestigious academic positions in two American Universities, which he declined because he felt that it would affect his duties as a monk.

Ramakrishna Mission

Soon after his return to Kolkata, Swami Vivekananda accomplished another important task of his mission on earth. He founded on **1 May 1897** a unique type of organization known as the Ramakrishna Mission, in which monks and lay people would jointly undertake propagation of Practical Vedanta, and various forms of social service, such as running hospitals, schools, colleges, hostels, rural development centres etc, and conducting massive relief and rehabilitation work for victims of earthquakes, cyclones and other calamities, in different parts of India and other countries.

Belur Math

In early 1898 Swami Vivekananda acquired a big plot of land on the western bank of the Ganga at a place called Belur to have a permanent abode for the monastery and monastic Order originally started at Baranagar, and got it registered as Ramakrishna Math after a couple of years. Here Swamiji established a new, universal pattern of monastic life which adapts ancient monastic ideals to the conditions of modern life, which gives equal importance to personal illumination

and social service, and which is open to all men without any distinction of religion, race or caste.

Vivekananda proclaimed "Renunciation and service" as the twofold national ideals of modern India and the work of the mission strives to practice and preach these. The service activities are based on the message of "Jiva is Shiva" from Ramakrishna and Vivekananda's message of "Daridra Narayana" to indicate that service to the poor is service to God.

Swamiji died in 1902, at the Belur Math, near Calcutta. The Ramakrishna Mission is spread all over India and many parts of the world and has done wonderful work in serving and uplifting people.

Swami Vivekananda Teachings

- Each individual is himself responsible for making or breaking his life. He should concentrate on his goal and should not rest until it is achieved.
- God is Nirankar (formless), with attributes.
- God is one and different religions serve as a path towards the same God.
- God is present in every living being and he, who serves others, serves God.
- Human being should strive towards truth, purity, sincerity, morals and unselfishness.
- The quintessence of every religion is to make people realize the highest spiritual truth.
- To be good and to do good is the main aim of every individual.

QUIZ

1. When and where was Swami Vivekananda born?
 - a. 1863 in Belur
 - b. 1881 in Kolkata
 - c. 1902 in Belur
 - d. 1863 in Kolkata
2. What was Swamiji's original name?
 - a. Narendranath
 - b. Ramakrishna
 - c. Yogananda
 - d. Somnath Datta
3. Who was swamiji's guru?
 - a. Sivananda
 - b. Ramakrishna Paramahansa
 - c. Narendranath Datta
 - d. Mahatma Gandhi
4. To which god did Swamiji pray regularly?
 - a. Siva
 - b. Durga
 - c. Kali
 - d. Krishna
5. When Swami Vivekananda prayed as asked by his guru, what did he ask for?
 - a. Wealth and knowledge
 - b. A good life for all his countrymen
 - c. Wisdom and freedom from worries
 - d. wisdom, discrimination, renunciation and Her uninterrupted vision
6. When Vivekananda went on a tour of India and studied the conditions prevalent in Colonial India what did he see?
 - a. He saw the anger of the people at the British
 - b. He saw that people wanted freedom
 - c. He saw the appalling poverty and backwardness of the masses
 - d. He saw that people were happy and contented
7. Where was the world Parliament of Religions of 1892 held?

- a. Chicago
 - b. Kolkatta
 - c. Belur
 - d. Houston
8. What was the opening phrase of Swamiji's address at the 1892 World Parliament of Religions?
- a. My dear friends
 - b. Dear fellow Americans
 - c. Greetings from India
 - d. Sisters and brothers of America
9. When and where was the first ashram of the Ramakrishna Mission established?
- a. 1902 in Kolkatta
 - b. 1863 in Belur
 - c. 1898 in Belur
 - d. 1892 in Chicago
10. What was NOT one of the teachings of Swami Vivekananda?
- a. God is one and different religions serve as a path towards the same
 - b. We should only pray to Kali
 - c. To be good and to do good is the main aim of every individual
 - d. The essence of every religion is to make people realize the highest spiritual truth
11. What was proclaimed as the twofold national ideals of modern India?
- a. Freedom and equality
 - b. Fame and fortune
 - c. Love and faith
 - d. Renunciation and service