Song of the Sannyasin
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INSIGHT

Song of the Sannyasin

Swami Vivekananda's 13-verse poem is an ascetic's creed and a compelling reminder of the supreme spiritual path

There was a time, not too long ago, when children and young men in India were taught that to renounce the world in the quest for God realization, in service to God, was the noblest human path. Parents would explain to boys that sannyasa, the way of the renunciate monk, was open to them. They would explain that, if they chose it, they would have the greatest chance of knowing once and for all the divine purpose and Ultimate Truth of life. Hindu scriptures clearly and abundantly proclaim sannyasa to be the highest dharma. But how many believe this anymore? How many parents encourage a child to consider sannyasa as a life pattern? How many young men honestly feel they will be respected more for donning orange robes and serving God than for wearing a white smock and amassing money? Still, there are bastions of hope. Notable are the Ramakrishna Mission [see page 16] and the Swaminarayan monastic orders--among India's three million mendicants. But today, more and more, if one proposed to Hindu parents that their son might become a swami, the response would be quiet disregard, indicating that "there are much better things the boy could do."

Swami Vivekananda held firm to the time-honored Hindu scriptural view of sannyasa. He lived it fully and experienced its every nuance. Yet he is so revered for his latter few years--traveling and promoting Hinduism in the West--that details of his ascetic life prior to his trip to America are not commonly recanted. Perhaps Vivekananda anticipated that renunciates might one day lose esteem, or perhaps he saw it happening in his lifetime. For in 1895, during a 7-week stay at Thousand Island Park, on the St. Lawrence River in New York State, he composed the eloquent Song of the Sannyasin, a 13-verse ode to the supremacy of renunciation.

Vivekananda and his song have inspired many saints of this century. Sage Yogaswami of Sri Lanka was deeply touched by Swami Vivekananda's public address given during a brief stay in Colombo in 1889. Vivekananda's opening words, "The time is short and the subject is vast," impacted the young Yogaswami profoundly. Yogaswami quoted the phrase like a mantra, endeavoring to impress upon devotees not to waste time in idle pursuits of the world, but immediately begin working for their liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, Yogaswami's successor (and Hinduism Today's publisher), was infused with the urge to renounce the world upon reading the Song of the Sannyasin for the first time, when just a teenager.

Today, each of the hundreds of Ramakrishna monks glean inspiration and encouragement from the Song of the Sannyasin and by studying Vivekananda's life. But the song was not his only declaration on sannyasa's supremacy. Swami

is well known for saying, "Never forget and teach to your children that as is the difference between a firefly and the blazing sun, between the infinite ocean and a little pond, between a mustard seed and the mountain Meru, such is the difference between the householder and the sannyasin!"

Vivekananda was arguably the most renowned Hindu spiritual leader of this century (even though he died in 1902 at age 39). It is the spirit of his renunciation, the essence, profound wisdom and insights into human experience gained from his dedicated life that the Song of the Sannyasin presents in poetic beauty and compelling command. Surprisingly, Vivekananda told no one that he wrote it. It remained entirely unknown until the original manuscript (shown below) was serendipitously discovered in 1947 during restorations of the cottage Vivekananda had stayed in. Opening the old wooden walls, carpenters found the hand-written manuscript, hidden from the world for 52 years. Perhaps Swamiji thought the song too imperious for the public. But why would he not share it with his brother sannyasins? It is still a mystery why Vivekananda would painstakingly compose these potent verses, then hide them in the wallboards of his cottage. Perhaps he knew they would be found at the right time, or perhaps his act was itself an example of giving up and letting go?

The remarkable philosopher-monk was only 32 years old at the time of his visit to the Park, but he was already a celebrity in America. He had arrived in the United States two years earlier, in July 1893, journeying from India to Chicago at the urging of his fellow monks and admirers to represent Hinduism at the World Parliament of Religions. His humble yet electrifying

address, at the end of an opening day of sectarian speeches, completely transformed the tenor of the conference. The New York Herald noted: "He is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the parliament."

Exhausted by nearly two strenuous years of lecturing throughout the US, Vivekananda was grateful to find refuge at the Park. Feeling rejuvenated, he gathered his spiritual power to train the twelve students who followed him there. His thoughts and teachings were transcribed into "Inspired Talks," a compilation which merged the spirituality of Ramakrishna with Swamiji's deep concern for the political freedom and material well-being of humanity. Swami said he was "at his best'' at Thousand Island Park. The ideas and visions he refined and expressed there grew during later years into institutions in India and elsewhere.

Vivekananda's song presents a bold message, one sorely needed in today's world. We present it here in honor of the Ramakrishna renunciates, and for all courageous youth who yet today dare to wonder if life may have more to offer... It does.

Song of the SannyÃ¢sin

Wake up the note! the song that had its birth
Far off, where worldly taint could never reach,
In mountain caves and glades of forest deep,
Whose calm no sigh for lust or wealth or fame
Could ever dare to break; where rolled the stream
Of knowledge, truth, and bliss that follows both.
Sing high that note, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,

"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Strike off thy fetters! bonds that bind thee down,
Of shining gold, or darker, baser ore--
Love, hate; good, bad; and all the dual throng.
Know slave is slave, caressed or whipped, not free;
For fetters, though of gold, are not less strong to bind.
Then off with them, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Let darkness go, the will-o'-the-wisp that leads
With blinking light to pile more gloom on gloom.
This thirst for life forever quench; it drags
From birth to death, and death to birth, the soul.
He conquers all who conquers self.
Know this and never yield, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

"Who sows must reap," they say, "and cause must bring
The sure effect: good, good; bad, bad; and none
Escapes the law. But whoso wears a form
Must wear the chain." Too true; but far beyond
Both name and form is Ã¢tman, ever free.
Know thou art That, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

They know not truth who dream such vacant dreams
As father, mother, children, wife and friend.
The sexless Self--whose father He? whose child?
Whose friend, whose foe, is He who is but One?

The Self is all in all--none else exists;
And thou art That, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

There is but One: the Free, the Knower, Self,
Without a name, without a form or stain.
In Him is mÃ¢yÃ¢, dreaming all this dream.
The Witness, He appears as nature, soul.
Know thou art That, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Where seekest thou? That freedom, friend, this world
Nor that can give. In books and temples, vain
Thy search. Thine only is the hand that holds
The rope that drags thee on. Then cease lament.
Let go thy hold, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Say, "Peace to all. From me no danger be
To aught that lives. In those that dwell on high,
In those that lowly creep--I am the Self in all!
All life, both here and there, do I renounce,
All heavens and earths and hells, all hopes and fears."
Thus cut thy bonds, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Heed then no more how body lives or goes.
Its task is done: let karma float it down.
Let one put garlands on, another kick
This frame: say naught. No praise or blame can be

Where praiser, praised, and blamer, blamed, are one.
Thus be thou calm, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Truth never comes where lust and fame and greed
Of gain reside. No man who thinks of woman
As his wife can ever perfect be;
Nor he who owns the least of things, nor he
Whom anger chains, can ever pass through mÃ¢yÃ¢'s gates.
So, give these up, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Have thou no home. What home can hold thee, friend?
The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed, and food
What chance may bring--well cooked or ill, judge not.
No food or drink can taint that noble Self
Which knows Itself. Like rolling river free
Thou ever be, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Few only know the truth. The rest will hate
And laugh at thee, great one; but pay no heed.
Go thou, the free, from place to place, and help
Them out of darkness, mÃ¢yÃ¢'s veil. Without
The fear of pain or search for pleasure, go
Beyond them both, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

Thus day by day, till karma's power's spent,

Release the soul forever. No more is birth,
Nor I, nor thou, nor God, nor man. The "I"
Has All become, the All is "I" and Bliss.
Know thou art That, sannyÃ¢sin bold! Say,
"Om Tat Sat, Om!"

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