

Swami Vivekananda: A Creative Genius

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HOUGH CREATIVITY IS a spontaneous mental process, it requires continuous enquiry, expertise in a particular domain, and a kind of developed intuition. Creativity transforms the mind and creative people transform themselves during times of creativity. There is a rush of energy during creative periods that lifts a person far above the ordinary world. One can be actively creative while talking, walking, thinking, speaking, or writing, as creativity has to do with the quality of intuition that one brings into the work. However, being creative does not

always require external actions. Imagine Buddha meditating under the Bodhi tree; although he may have appeared to be idle, he was actually exercising one of the greatest creative brains the world has ever seen.

To be creative means to be courageous, to experiment, to take risks, and create something new. Creativity is the ability of the mind to have a keen sense of curiosity and therefore is not confined to any particular area. Many psychological processes are involved such as cognition, problem solving, emotion, memory, and so on. Creative people tend to be multifaceted and, by harmonizing the various aspects of their being, they can develop an admirable character. Very spiritual people are generally creative and Swami Vivekananda was unequivocally a creative genius.

A creative mind is distinguished by its ability to accept multiple perspectives simultaneously, without getting stuck in epistemological battles. Possessing a sharp intellect rooted in Western philosophy, Swamiji was naturally sceptical about religious claims. He questioned everything and insisted upon proof. Yet, despite being well grounded in reason and logic, his creative mind was flexible enough to eventually transcend the limitations of rationality by surrendering to the call of the Divinity emanating from a poor priest at the Kali temple.

Swami Vivekananda's scientific bent of mind can be traced back to his childhood. In his father's office there were several hookahs meant for people of different castes and religions. The young boy, Naren, was curious what would happen if he touched the hookahs of other communities; would the roof fall on him? Would he die? Initially, Naren's creative mind rejected this. To test his hypothesis, he took a whiff from all the hookahs and then cheerfully declared to his father that nothing happened to him when he broke caste rules. In another famous example of his scientific

leanings, he did not accept the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna without proper testing. This analytical rigour can be seen at every stage of his life.

Swamiji demonstrated his mental flexibility and creative talent in many ways. One fascinating instance comes in the form of his paradoxical personality that held two contrary positions, a commitment for austerity and asceticism on the one hand, and a very down-to-earth humanness on the other.

In an essay titled 'Paradoxical Prophet', Swami Yogeshananda explains this dichotomy:

Swamiji was both a preserver of the past and a harbinger of the future; truth for him did not depend on whether it was old or new. You recall that in ancient Greece, mythology told of a monster called Scylla and a whirlpool called Charybdis, with ships having to ply narrowly between the two. Now when Swami Vivekananda returned to India this is what he said: 'There are the two great obstacles on our path in India, the Scylla of old orthodoxy and the Charybdis of modern European civilization. Of these two I vote for the old orthodoxy for the old orthodox man may be ignorant, but he has strength and stands on his own feet.' Yet the Swami himself was in many ways unorthodox. He saw the Indians of his day as chained—by superstitions, by political subjugation, by sheer *tamas*. He would shock them by crossing the seas, eating food from a Muslim vendor, bringing Western students into high-caste homes, challenging outmoded ideas. He told pupils of a Calcutta art school, 'Why do you always have to represent Kali in exactly the same way: same pose, same ornaments, same expression; where is your creativity?'¹

It is often said that Hinduism is paradoxical due to its uncanny ability to seamlessly harmonize contradictory positions. Therefore, it follows that Swamiji, as the embodiment of Hinduism, would also be paradoxical, favouring

broad integration, transcendence, and inclusivity over narrow, dogmatic, and exclusionary fundamentalism. Creative minds shun the concrete and the convergent for the abstract and the divergent.

Another way in which Swamiji demonstrated his creative genius was through spontaneity. His sharp wit served him well in both humorous situations and philosophical deliberations. One time an American asked tauntingly: “If all things are one, what is the difference between a cabbage and a man?” Sharp came the Swami’s reply, “Stick a knife into your leg, and you will see the line of demarcation.”²

In another situation Haripada Mitra asked Swamiji to explain the scientific aspects of space and time. Swamiji’s spontaneous response was so lucid and profound that even today, what he said in 1892, can still illumine the brains of the best scientists. ‘He said, “There can be no two infinities.” When I [Haripada] said that time is infinite and so is space, he replied, “I can understand that space is infinite, but it passes my understanding how time can be infinite. In any case, I can understand that only one thing can be infinite. If there be two infinities, how would you demarcate their respective spheres? If

you advance further, you will find that time and space get lost in each other. Still further advance will show you that all things are infinite, but those infinite things are one in essence and not two.”³

Being creative also means being introspective, boldly learning from mistakes, and sharing the new found knowledge so others may profit. Once, weary after a long trek to Vrindavan, Swami Vivekananda was pleased to find a man by the roadside contentedly smoking a pipe. With all the ease and camaraderie of a fellow smoker, he asked the stranger for a puff from the chillum. The villager looked up at the imposing figure in ochre clothes and shrank back, shaking his head, and proclaiming that

he was a low-caste sweeper. Swamiji too instinctively pulled back. Continuing down the road he felt uneasy and disturbed. As a sannyasin Swamiji aspired to be above notions of caste and prestige, yet he fell back to old habits. Realizing this he suddenly turned around, went back to the villager, and said: ‘Do prepare a Chillum of tobacco for me, my dear friend.’⁴ The mystified man agreed to share his chillum only after much persuasion. Centuries of conditioning had convinced the sweeper he was an outcaste and, therefore, was duty-bound to protect the purity of the upper castes by staying out of their way. Swamiji’s forthright admission of his mistake speaks eloquently of his flexibility and dedication to creative growth.



Another distinguishing characteristic of creative people is their ability to synthesize disparate, non-linear ideas. Swamiji has this virtue and explained the deepest truths of religion and science as if they were two sides of the same coin. He also was able to bridge traditional barriers to win the hearts of followers of many religions.

Sarfraz Hussain, one of Swamiji's disciples was a Muslim. In a letter to him Swamiji wrote:

Whether we call it Vedantism or any ism, the truth is that Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought, and the only position from which one can look upon all religions and sects with love. I believe it is the religion of the future enlightened humanity. ... I am firmly persuaded that without the help of practical Islam, theories of Vedantism, however fine and wonderful they may be, are entirely valueless to the vast mass of mankind. ... For our own motherland a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam—Vedanta brain and Islam body—is the only hope.⁵

Swamiji channelled his creative energy in various ways. He was an extraordinary orator, brilliant writer, soulful singer, sensitive poet, outstanding motivator, charismatic leader of the masses, and an affectionate spiritual master. He displayed superior communication skills by completely understanding the needs and levels of the receiver before communicating so that the message would reach unmistakably. With scholars he could be scholarly and with the guileless he would be exceedingly simple.

Once addressing students in the audience after a lecture in Madras, Swamiji said: 'First of all, our young men must be strong. Religion will come afterwards. Be strong, my young friends; ... You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of *the Gita*. ... You will understand the *Gita* better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger.'⁶ In this way

Swamiji masterfully explained the essential requirements for the study of Vedanta and developing the spirit of nationalism in a manner they could understand and implement.

Swami Vivekananda's life and teachings continue to inspire countless young men and women year after year to renounce the comforts of the modern world and take up sannyasa. He took the best elements of all monastic principles and practices, indigenous as well as non-indigenous, ancient as well as modern, and formed them into a dynamic machinery to work out national awakening in India through spirituality. This is a remarkable achievement in Indian monasticism, which is serving as a template for other organizations too—a testament to Swamiji's creative genius.

'Thus the multi-dimensional journey of Swami Vivekananda's life is a tale of stupendous human will, adventure, and lyrical beauty. There are clues here for understanding the ground we stand on today and perhaps signposts for helping one step across the minefield of contemporary strife.'⁷ ❧

References

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