

Lessons of History

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When great historians are asked what we learn from history, they say we learn nothing, that history tends to repeat itself, and humanity makes the same mistakes with mathematical regularity. This is because we never look back, we never reflect and ask ourselves the question 'What do we learn?' We don't ask it at the individual level, or at the community level. We don't ask it at the national or international levels either. This lack of reflection is really at the heart of the historian's lament.

In the compass of a short essay, it is difficult to cover such a vast topic with any justice. So this essay will be based on the lessons I have learned from history.

In the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, the teacher tells the students on the completion of their course: 'Svādhyāya pravacanābhyāṁ na pramaditaavyam, Do not refrain from learning and teaching' (1.11.1). That is to say, always put the question: 'What do I learn from this?' The words *svādhyāya* and *pravacana* are often translated as 'study and teaching'. But *svādhyāya* is *sva* (self) plus *adhyāya* (study) meaning 'self-study' or 'learning'. Thus, in whatever we study, in whatever we experience, we can always ask this question: What do I learn? Our studies will then become more meaningful, more purposeful. This is the essence of introspection.

What is History?

So what is history? Is it the story of battles and wars, of pillage and conquest, of man's inhumanity to man, of meaningless dates and disconnected events? The way history is taught in our schools, it would certainly seem so. It is no wonder that such a study is disgusting.

Swami Vivekananda, in his famous speech 'The Future of India', says:

Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library. ... If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages in the world, and encyclopaedias are the Rishis.

To this, we might add the dangers of modern society. The Internet seems to have become a sort of divine oracle and everyone wants to consult it, often without thinking. The World Wide Web is an information super-highway all right. But there are also facts on

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the Web placed by individuals often with vested interests. We should exercise great caution before accepting anything in the Internet as true. Whatever else, the Internet is certainly not a divine oracle.

'True education,' Swamiji defines, 'is the development of a faculty, not an accumulation of words, or as a training of individuals to will rightly and efficiently' (5.231). This is the systematic development of the mind. Elsewhere he says,

To me, the very essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collecting of facts. If I had to do my education over again, and had any voice in the matter, I would not study facts

at all. I would develop the power of concentration and detachment, and then with a perfect instrument, I could collect facts at will (6.38).

Thus, the mind must be trained to 'will rightly and efficiently' before it can begin the study of anything. That perspective is, as I said at the beginning, from the vantage point of learning. What does the study mean to me? How do I grow by this study? What is it that I learn? How does it help me in my interpersonal relationships?

We are heirs to all the great thoughts of the past. We have inherited the spiritual wisdom of the saints and sages of all nations. Let us claim our inheritance and study the spiritual history of the world. Sri Krishna's teaching of karma yoga—working with a detached, loving, concerned attitude—will do me more good than knowing the date on which the Magna Carta was signed. Buddha's teaching

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of the Total View (*Samyag-darśana*) and the Eightfold Path will steer me through the problems of life better than the knowledge of the origin and cause of the Hundred Years War. Christ's message of love and his Sermon on the Mount will guide us through troubled days better than learning by heart the ruminations and opinions of some tyrant politician.

I am reminded of a joke about a history examination. The question asked of the student was: 'Discuss the events and causes that led to the war of 1812.' The student drew a blank. Time was running out. So he wrote: 'Before the war of 1812, there was the war of 1811 and before that...' We really can't say he was wrong!

So the study of history should be meaningful to our life, must enlighten us, effect our moral and spiritual growth. In this endeavour,

the study of the lives and teachings of the saints and sages of the world is most uplifting.

Speaking of the 'The Great Teachers of the World', Swami Vivekananda said:

By studying the lives of these great Messengers, we find that each, as it were, was destined to play a part and a part only; that the harmony consists in the sum total, and not in one note. As in the life of races—no race is born to alone enjoy the world. None dare say so. Each race has a part to play in this divine harmony of nations. Each race has its mission to perform, its duty to fulfil. The sum total is the great harmony!' (4.120-1).

This is perhaps the first lesson of history we should learn: every race and culture has produced men and women of noble character and we may learn from a careful study of their lives. Our life becomes richer and deeper by such study. No matter what we may say, we all need role models, examples, shining luminously in our consciousness, illumining the path of our life.

The Value of Study: To Awaken Faith in Oneself

When we study the lives of such great personalities, we find that our problems pale into insignificance. Our troubles and difficulties are nothing compared to the problems they had to wrestle with. By such study we get a fountain of inspiration, a meaning for our own existence and endeavour, and find that we too have a part to play in this drama of life. We begin to realize that if we are able to live a peaceable and prosperous life, it is because of the struggles and sacrifices of others who lived before us. We enjoy certain civil liberties today because someone had a dream and sacrificed his life for that dream.

'I have a dream.' Those words still echo in our consciousness from the Corinthian pillars of the Lincoln Memorial. Even to visualize the scene that happened less than forty years ago is electrifying. We can still hear those words of Dr Martin Luther King Jr: 'I have a dream. ... Let us not wallow in the valley of

despair. ... even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. ... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream ...'

These words awaken in us a deep sense of gratitude. Thinking about them, reflecting on these struggles, we can try to establish a mutual spiritual kinship. We are part of that struggle. We are part of the whole. Thus, history is not in the past. It is around us in the living present. Only we need eyes to see.

An intelligent study of history arouses in us a sense of enthusiasm, faith in ourselves. Says Swami Vivekananda:

Throughout the history of mankind, if any motive power has been more potent than another in the lives of all great men and women, it is that of faith in themselves. Born with the consciousness that they were to be great, they became great. Let a man go down as low as possible; there must come a time when out of sheer desperation he will take an upward curve and will learn to have faith in himself. ... We can see that all the difference between man and man is owing to the existence or non-existence of faith in himself. Faith in ourselves will do everything. I have experienced it in my own life, and am still doing so; and as I grow older that faith is becoming stronger and stronger. ... The old religions said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is the atheist who does not believe in himself (2.301).

The second lesson of history is that people of exemplary character had many difficulties and bitter experiences in their life, which they overcame through a tremendous faith in themselves. We find them almost superhuman. These examples inspire us, for in them we see that it is through struggles, through failures and errors, that spiritual giants have arisen.

To cite a humorous case, Mahatma Gandhi describes how in his student days, training for the legal profession, he was required to at-

tend the proceedings at Bombay High Court. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes:

I used to attend High Court daily whilst in Bombay, but I cannot say that I learnt anything there. I had not sufficient knowledge to learn much. Often I could not follow the cases and dozed off. There were others also who kept me company in this, and thus lightened my load of shame. After a time, I even lost the sense of shame, as I learnt to think that it was fashionable to doze in the High Court.²

We know how, despite such sloppy study habits, Gandhi later disciplined himself and became a moral and spiritual giant inspiring others by his example.

In *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* we find him saying that he ought to receive eternal damnation for all the sins of his youth. Yet, he transformed his character, changed his habits, and through the power of prayer became a spiritual giant whose writings influ-

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enced the growth of Christianity for at least five centuries. Augustine would pray, 'Too narrow is the house of my soul for You to enter into it; let it be enlarged by You. It lies in ruins; please build it up again. ... Who else can I call upon than You?'

On the theme of growth through errors, Swami Vivekananda says in his lecture 'The Great Teachers of the World':

Let us think something new, even if it be wrong. It is better to do that. ... We become wiser through failures. ... Look at the wall. Did the wall ever tell a lie? It is always the wall. Man tells a lie—and becomes a god too. ... The people who never think anything for themselves are not yet born into the world of religion; they have a mere jelly-fish existence.³

We should not regret our mistakes; rather we should learn from them. Failures are

stepping-stones for our spiritual growth, says Swami Vivekananda. If that be the case, let us pile them high and climb up to those celestial summits.

Originality in Historical Solutions

The third lesson of history is that nations and civilizations grow through the self-discipline and spiritual evolution of a few creative and original individuals. We find them often retreating into profound introspection, into a deep analysis of their past, with a serious discontent with the present condition of society and a passionate yearning to find a way out. We find this in the lives of Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Sankaracharya, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

For example, in Buddha's life, we learn how he was struck by the misery of the world, though being born a prince and brought up in the lap of luxury. He could not find comfort in personal happiness, and renounced his princely life and wandered into the forest in search of a way out of human misery. There, sitting under the bo tree and vowing not to get up until he had found the solution, he attained enlightenment and taught the world the Eightfold Path.

Six hundred years before Christ, Buddha travelled in India teaching people how to liberate themselves from misery, how to get rid of craving, selfishness and superstition. Swami Vivekananda writes of Buddha:

... consider his marvellous brain! No emotionalism. That giant brain never was superstitious. Believe not because an old manuscript has been produced, because it has been handed down to you from your forefathers, because your friends want you to—but think for yourself; search out truth for yourself, realize it yourself. ... One has to have a mind that is crystal clear; only then can truth shine in it.⁴

That a man who lived almost 3000 years ago can touch us, influence and inspire us, is a remarkable fact. It is because of the power of his *tapasyā*, the depth of his meditation and introspection. He was not satisfied with superfi-

cial solutions. He went to the heart of the problem and found the way out. That is why millions around the world worship him. He taught us self-reliance, how to think for ourselves.

When we come to the life of Jesus 600 years later, we do not have any record of his austerities or spiritual practices. But we have his spiritual teachings as handed down to us in the Sermon on the Mount. 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.' 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.' Purify the mind and heart and you will find God.

The hands of Jesus have touched many lives and transformed them across the vast stretches of time. In all such transformed lives, we find a deep questioning, a profound introspection, to penetrate into the heart of things.

To cite an example of recent times, Mahatma Gandhi writes of his first encounter with Christian teachings:

... one of the Plymouth Brethren confronted me with an argument for which I was not prepared:

'Sin we must. It is impossible to live in this world sinless. And therefore Jesus suffered and atoned for all the sins of mankind. Only he who accepts His great redemption can have eternal peace.'

The argument utterly failed to convince me. I humbly replied:

'If this be the Christianity acknowledged by all Christians, I cannot accept it. I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin. I seek to be redeemed from sin itself, or rather from the very thought of sin.'⁵

It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God, and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were His sons. If Jesus was like God, or God Himself, then all men were like God and could be God Himself. My reason was not ready to believe literally that Jesus by his death and by his blood redeemed the sins of the world. Metaphorically there might be some truth in it. ... I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born (p. 113).

We find the same introspective conflict in

the life of Martin Luther King Jr. He lived only forty years ago. Born as a son of a Christian preacher, and himself a preacher, he could not resolve the contradictions of the teachings, the contradictions in life and in society. In his *Autobiography*, he writes:

I guess I accepted biblical studies uncritically until I was about 12 years old. But this uncritical attitude could not last long, for it was contrary to the very nature of my being. I had always been the questioning and precocious type. At 13, I shocked my Sunday School by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Doubts began to spring forth unrelentingly. ... My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white man, but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him. The question arose in my mind: how could I love a race of people who hated me? ... This was the great question for a number of years.⁶

He didn't stop there and accept the state of things. Combining intellectual studies with critical inquiry and a spiritual introspection, he evolved a personal philosophy of effective action. He wrote:

... I despaired about the power of love in solving social problems. I felt the Christian ethic of love was confined to individual relationships. I could not see how it could work in social conflict ... until I heard about Mahatma Gandhi. ... As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism about the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. ... Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.

The philosophy of non-violent resistance of evil as embodied in the lives of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr can also be applied in dealing with our own turbulent inner condition. Sometimes confronting our shortcomings head on is perhaps the wrong thing to do. It only strengthens them even more. When Swami Turiyananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, asked his master how to free oneself completely from lust, Sri Ramakrishna re-

plied: 'Why should it go, my boy? Give it a turn in another direction.'⁸ That is the secret. This is really non-violence, non-cooperation with evil. We give our energies, our aspirations and our desires a spiritual turn. We engage them in a constructive and creative direction.

To recap, there are three main lessons of history. The first is that all nations and races have produced men and women of exalted character and we can learn from a serious study of their lives and teachings. Since time is short, their lives are the only thing worth studying. The second is that each of these noble individuals had tremendous faith in themselves that they could transform themselves and that they could make a difference. Third, they followed this up by intense yearning, deep introspection and fiery *tapasyā*. And out of that came their life's work.

No system can make us. We have to make ourselves. In the life of Sri Ramakrishna we find this intense yearning and *tapasyā*. He had tremendous faith in himself. He always regarded himself as a child of God, a child of the Divine Mother. In his life, we see him ever eager to learn from everyone. 'As long as I live so long do I learn,' he would say. We see him practising the spiritual disciplines of all major religions, not academically as we tend to, but plunging into them headlong, forgetting his traditional past and merging into the spiritual ideals represented by those religions. Thus he realized the harmony of all religions.

This attitude of taking a total view, a holistic view, is even more important today than it ever was because we stand on the precipice overlooking the valley of self-destruction. For this is the age of specialization, where each of us knows more and more about less and less, with none of us having a global view. Today, we are about to put our future in the hands of computers. The society we have created is so fragile that if one plug is pulled, if one microchip fails to work properly, society comes to a standstill and we are all in the dark—literally.

Instead of technology being our servant,

we have become its servants. Fifty years ago, it was said that science would give humanity the leisure to contemplate, to meditate and grow spiritually. Actually the opposite has happened. Technology appears to have taken away the leisure we had and filled it with more work. How many of us bring our work home! Now that we are connected through the computer, our weekends and evenings are spent replying to e-mail and so forth. Science has unleashed its power without giving us the wisdom to use that wisely, to control it, to channel its use.

As a child, I remember reading the mythological story of Matsya avatara, the fish incarnation, and Hayagriva, a demon who had the body of a human being but the head of a horse. The demon steals the Vedas from Brahma, the Creator. Then Vishnu incarnates as the giant fish and deluges the world to restore the Vedas to Brahma. Hayagriva is the human being who has not outgrown his animal tendencies and is a symbol of the modern man, dangerously armed with technology.

After completing his encyclopaedic study of world history, Arnold Toynbee says,

In the present age, the world has been united on the material plane by Western technology. ... At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. ... Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence and Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions: here we have the attitude and the spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family—and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves.

Yet even the strongest and most respectable utilitarian motive is only a secondary reason for taking Ramakrishna's and Gandhi's ... teaching to heart and acting on it. The primary reason is that this teaching is right—and is right because it flows from a true vision of spiritual reality.⁹

Thus, it is not by conquest and competition that peace is secured but rather through the spirit of cooperation and understanding.

Looking at history, we see that empire after empire has fallen as if testifying that conquest has never brought about unity. Only the spiritual empires of the world's saints and sages with their message of love and harmony are intact. It is for us to take it up and practise it in our lives. Says Swami Vivekananda:

The more I study history, the more I find that idea [of competition] to be wrong. Some say that if man did not fight with man, he would not progress. I also used to think so; but I find now that every war has thrown back human progress by fifty years instead of hurrying it forwards. The day will come when men will study history from a different light and find that competition is ... not necessary to evolution at all.¹⁰

Human society is an interdependent society. We can all progress through a spirit of cooperation. Our future depends on it. May we all imbibe the spirit of learning from all the saints and sages of the world and, imbued with faith in ourselves, dive deep into our own being. May we realize the interconnectedness of all life and live peacefully in a spirit of mutual cooperation. This is my prayer. *

References

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