

VIVEKANANDA AND THE ART OF MEMORY

June 26, 1994

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Episodes from Vivekananda's life

The human problem is one of memory. We have forgotten our divine nature. All the great teachers of the past have declared that the revival of the memory of our divinity is the paramount goal.

Memory is a faculty and as such, it is neither good nor bad. Every action that we do, every thought that we think, leaves an indelible trail of memory. Whether we remember or not, the contents are recorded and affect our daily life. Therefore, an awareness of this faculty and its method of operation is vital for healthy existence. Properly employed, it leads us to enlightenment; abused or misused, it can torment us. So we must learn to use it properly, to strengthen it for our own improvement.

In studying the life of Vivekananda, we come across many phenomenal examples of his amazing faculty of memory.

In 'Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda,' Haripada Mitra relates the following story: One day, in the course of a talk, Swamiji quoted verbatim some two or three pages from Pickwick Papers. I wondered at this, not understanding how a sanyasin could get by heart so much from a secular book. I thought that he must have read it quite a number of times before he took orders. When questioned, he said, "I read it twice - once when I was in school, and again some five or six months back." "Then how do you remember, " I asked in wonder, "and why can't we remember thus ?" "*One has to read with full attention, " he explained, "and one must not fritter away the energy one draws from food."*

Another day, Swamiji was reading a book all by himself, reclining in his bed. I was in another room. Suddenly, he laughed so aloud that I thought that there must be some occasion for such laughter, and so I advanced to his door to find that nothing special had happened. He continued to read as before. I stood there for some fifteen minutes; still he

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did not notice me. His mind was all riveted on the book. Later on, he noticed me and asked me to walk in. When he heard that I had been standing there for a pretty long time, he said, *“Whatever one has to do, one must apply to it one’s whole attention and energy for the time being. Pavhari Baba of Ghazipur would clean his brass water vessel with the same undivided attention as he used in his meditation, japa, worship and study. He cleaned it so diligently that it shone like gold.”*

Once, in Meerut, Akhandananda, a brother disciple, went to bring books from the local library for Vivekananda. One day, the Swami asked him to bring the works of Sir John Lubbock. Accordingly, Akhandananda brought them, one volume each day. The Swami would finish a volume in a day and return it the next day. The librarian argued with Akhandananda that the Swami had surely returned the volumes without reading them and remarked that the latter was only making a show of reading them. Hearing of this, the Swami himself went to the librarian and said, “Sir, I have mastered all these volumes, if you have any doubt, you may put any question to me about them.” The librarian then examined the monk, and by doing so became fully satisfied. Great was his astonishment. Later, Akhandananda asked Swamiji how he could do it. The Swami replied, *“I never read a book word by word. I read sentence by sentence, sometimes paragraph by paragraph, in a sort of kaleidoscopic form.”*

The Swami’s prodigious memory was demonstrated from his youth. In college, for instance, he would finish a big book such as Green’s History of the English People in just one night, keeping awake by drinking strong tea or coffee.

Shortly before the end of his life, he fell ill. During his convalescence, he had begun reading the newly published edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. His disciple, Saratchandra Chakravarty, seeing one day these twenty five large volumes, remarked, “It is difficult to master the contents of so many volumes in one life.” He did not know at the time that the Swami had already finished ten volumes and was reading the eleventh. “What do you mean ?” said the Swami. “Ask me whatever you like from these ten volumes and I can tell you all about it.” The disciple, out of curiosity, brought down the volumes and started asking him questions on abstruse topics. Not only did the Swami answer these questions, displaying a vast amount of even technical knowledge, but in many instances he quoted the very language of the the books! The disciple was astounded at the extraordinary grasp and memory of his guru and exclaimed, “This is beyond the power of man.” The Swami then told him that there was nothing miraculous about it. *“If one observed the strictest*

Brahmacharya, one could retain and repeat exactly what one had heard or read but once, even if years ago.”

Brahmacharya refers to a life of intense study, with a mind free from all mental distractions. The concept of a “Bachelor’s degree” is derived from this idea.

Another encounter of a similar nature occurred with the German scholar, Professor Paul Deussen. When the Swami was looking into a book of poetry, the Professor, wanting to draw him into a conversation spoke to him, but received no response; Swamiji continued to turn the pages. Later on, when he came to know of it, the Swami apologized for it, explaining to the Professor that he had been so absorbed in the reading that he had heard nothing. The Swami’s mind was always focussed as a steady laser beam on the matter at hand. Deussen was at first incredulous, but was later astounded when the Swami recited whatever he had been reading.

2. Episodes from Ramakrishna’s life

In the life of Sri Ramakrishna too we see this phenomenal manifestation of memory. As a child, Ramakrishna used to recite in the fields and pastures of Kamarpukur, the songs and stories of the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata, having listened to them just once.

After attending a drama of three hours duration, he could repeat the entire drama from memory, and re-enact it for those who could not attend it.

3. Their comparison by Swami Saradananda

A direct disciple, Swami Saradananda, compared the Master (Sri Ramakrishna) and Swami Vivekananda in the following way: *He was a srutidhara of the first order - he could remember anything he heard but once. Swamiji was one of the second order. He had to read or hear anything twice and only then could he remember it.”* When questioned by a disciple how one gets this power, Saradananda replied, *These people have great control over their mind. Whatever they concentrate on gets stuck in their minds at once. It requires great powers of concentration. Whatever they say or hear, they remember for years.”* He continued, *“What’s the difference between a srutidhara and an ordinary person ? A srutidhara can focus all the powers of one’s mind to a point, whereas the mental forces of an ordinary person are scattered and the individual does not have the power to focus them on one thing. The mind is perhaps divided among many things. It is almost impossible*

to concentrate such a mind. The Master would compare the mind to a packet of mustard seeds. If the packet is once untied the seeds get scattered in all directions. How difficult it is to collect them again. Some perhaps are lost forever.”

4. Other examples from history.

I believe there have been many such srutidharas in history. For instance, Shankara in the eighth century, was considered one. His disciple, Padmapada, wrote a large treatise of commentary on the Brahma Sutra Bhashya and gave it one of his uncles to read. The uncle was extremely jealous of his nephew's erudition and so he burnt it. There were no xerox machines in those days, and so Padmapada, extremely dejected, reported it to Shankara, who thereupon said that there was no need to worry. Padmapada had read it out to him at one time, so Shankara said, I will dictate it to you from memory, and you can now rewrite it. Many other episodes are scattered in history. Saint Thomas Aquinas was reputed to have a powerful memory of this type. The Roman philosopher Seneca (55 BC - 37 AD) was said to be able to repeat long passages of speeches he had heard only once many years before. He would impress his students by asking each member of the class of two hundred to recite a line of poetry and then he would recite all the lines they had quoted, in reverse order - from the last to the first. Saint Augustine, in his Confessions, writes of his admiration of a friend who could recite the complete works of Virgil, backwards and more recently, Mahatma Gandhi writes in his “Experiments with Truth” of one Raychandbhai who performed similar feats of memory.

Mahendra Nath Gupta, or M., the author of the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, tells us how he trained his memory through diary writing from the age of 14 while he was still in high school. He would be meticulous in his recording of the conversations. Later, when he met Sri Ramakrishna, he would go home and meditate on his conversations and precisely record what he had learnt. He did this as a method of learning and today we are all indebted to him for his labour of love.

5. The ancient art of memory.

A famous mathematician, Norbert Wiener, used to say, “What we don't use, we lose.” After the advent of the printed page, the ancient art of memory was not practiced widely. And so, now we have lost it. In the ancient days of Greece, Socrates perceived this danger and he fingers the invention of writing as the culprit. “This discovery,” warns Socrates, “will create forgetfulness in the learner's souls, because they will not use their memories;

they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves ... and you give your disciples not truth, but only a semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without reality.”

Of course, if it wasn't for writing, these words of Socrates would not have survived till today and I would now not stand before you and relate to you some of the great thoughts of the past. Through writing, we inherit a legacy and the study of the past is really a form of enlightenment. Everything seems to have a dual use. We can just as well blame the loss of the ability to think on television, or the new technological age. However, it is really the use we make of these devices that determines their contribution to the growth or decay of society.

In the ancient world, however, memory ruled daily life. It was through the power of memory that knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation. Everyone needed this faculty and so, if we look back into the ancient schools, we find the art of memory was taught in a deliberate and explicit manner.

In India, the Vedas were memorized and preserved for centuries before they were written down. Their poetic rhythm made it easier for one to commit it to memory. The same was true of the giant epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In Greece, students memorized Homer's epics of the Iliad and the Odyssey.

6. The laws of memory.

It is well-known that we don't use more than 10% of our inherited capacity for memory. We waste the other 90% by violating the laws of memory. What are these laws of memory ?

They are, the law of impression, the law of repetition and the law of association. The first rule is to get a deep, vivid, and lasting impression of the ideas we want to remember. This is done through interest and attention. If the mind is held on an idea, it is a remarkable psychological law that interest and eventually love slowly manifest themselves. Vivekananda writes, “Everybody's mind becomes concentrated at times. We all concentrate upon those things we love and we love those things upon which we concentrate our minds.” (6.37)

Five minutes of even vivid and energetic concentration produces greater results than days of moaning about in a mental haze. Thomas Edison found that none of his thirty assistants ever noticed a cherry tree that grew on the grounds of his factory in Metro Park, New Jersey. He wrote, “The average person’s brain does not observe a thousandth part of what the eye observes. It is almost incredible how poor our powers of observation are.” It is indeed a question of training or habit. In Harry Houdini’s biography, we find how he trained himself to have a photographic memory by looking at the contents of a room and instantly able to recall all of the objects in it.

Abraham Lincoln complained that he did not have a good memory. So to rectify it, he would read aloud everything he wanted to remember. He explained, “When I read aloud, two senses catch the idea: first, I see what I read; second, I hear it and therefore remember it better.” “My mind,” he continued, “is like a piece of steel. Very hard to scratch anything on it, but almost impossible, after you get it there, to rub it out.”

Mark Twain developed a visual system of memory so that he could speak without notes. His idea was to associate a visual image with each point he wanted to make and then to remember the sequence of images. For instance, he would associate an image with each number: sun is associated with one, a zoo with two, a tree with three; a door with four and so on. The first point in the talk would then be changed to an image and that image would then be superimposed on the sun. The second point would be translated into an image and superimposed on a zoo and so on. For instance, if you were committing this talk to such visual memory, one could associate the six stories I began with to six visual images. This ability is in itself a new art to be cultivated and practiced. As one does so, one finds the power of associating images with ideas and pigeonholing them increases with practice.

The origin of this technique is very ancient. The old texts speak of the “inner cathedrals of memory.” They describe the architectural approach of impinging ideas in the consciousness. For instance, students were advised to look at buildings and architecture very carefully, to take a walking tour of all its chambers. When a sequence of ideas was to be remembered, the ideas were to be changed into images and placed in each chamber in the sequence of the pre-meditated walking tour. It was suggested that the more ridiculous the image, the easier it was to remember.

“Our mind is essentially an associating machine, ” writes William James. “An edu-

cated memory depends upon an organized system of associations ... The secret of a good memory is thus the secret of forming diverse and multiple associations with every fact we care to retain.” The knowledge that is used tends to stick. Usage is the method to retain ideas or make new ideas enter our brain and energize it.

Ramakrishna’s mind must have been one magnificent constellation of associations. Literally, any idea or suggestion transported his mind to the highest state. At the zoo, for instance, the sight of a lion suggested to him Mother Durga, or the Divine Mother, and at once he was absorbed in samadhi. Someone casually closed an umbrella and that suggested to him the gathering of the rays of the mind, and again he was absorbed in samadhi. The quality of our life depends largely upon the kinds of associations we make.

Vivekananda says, “Every new thought that we have must make, as it were, a new channel through the brain, and that explains the tremendous conservatism of human nature. Human nature likes to run through the ruts that are already there, because it is easy. ... Each thought that we have makes a path in the brain and this path would close up, but for the grey matter which comes and makes a lining to keep it separate. If there were no grey matter, there would be no memory, because memory means going over these old paths, retracing a thought, as it were.” (1.225)

We can utilise these three laws: impression, repetition and association with great effect. I have in my own life. But these laws and techniques do not explain the phenomenal nature of the memories of srutidharas.

In our case, we observe objects and ideas through layers of past impressions and prejudices. We have to repeat and re-iterate these ideas to make them stay in our minds because the clouds of pre-conceived notions and impressions keep interfering with our experience. Truly, we never experience the world. We only experience our opinion of it. In the case of the srutidhara, there are virtually no such prejudices or pre-conceived notions. In such a pure mind, the rays of consciousness illumine the ideas directly.

This view is supported by Swami Vimalananda, who recollects his first meeting with Vivekananda: “I had always thought that Swamiji’s gigantic intellect was the result of his highly elevated life of purity. Greater acquaintance with him was making my belief stronger till one day, his own words made it a settled conviction with me. It was a memorable evening in my life which shall never be effaced from my mind, when a question from one of his would-be disciples brought forth an exhaustive and stirring discourse on

brahmacharya. In the course of the talk he was explaining to us the incalculable value of purity in religious life, how to practice it, how religious fervor, suddenly aroused by working on the emotional side of man to the utter neglect of the moral and intellectual, is apt to produce great reaction ... Then at last when he came to talk of the infinite powers of strict mental purity and how the animal propensity is converted into spiritual might, he warmed up to such a high pitch of earnestness that it seemed as if the transparent soul within was flowing out in torrents through his lips, bathing its hearers with its heavenly waters. The picture that was being drawn by his words in our minds saw its own prototype in the figure that stood before us. And I leave it to you, gentlemen, to imagine the effect of these concluding words of the discourse upon us: "My Master had told me that if I could attain to the perfect state of purity I had just described, I will have spiritual insight. I ventured to stand before the world only when I had been satisfied that I had attained to it. I earnestly appeal to you, my boys, to keep this ideal with adamant firmness. Pray, do not be unworthy of me." On another occasion too I heard him speak of his spiritual insight which could at once see the end of a thing hidden in the womb of futurity, of which the beginning is only made. I must not be understood to mean that intellectual brightness is always a sign of spirituality. A man may have a great intellect without being in the least spiritual. On the other hand a person may be spiritual without having the mind stored with information, vast and varied or without the power to put the words into logical form. But truth will flash in that mind of itself ... Swami Vivekananda combined in him spiritual insight with an intellect of the highest order. Truth came to him by intuition. But he would press his intellect into service by giving it logical form and making it convincing by a rich supply of facts and analogies stored in his brain."

7. The role of memory in daily life

So what is memory ? It is when an idea or image is retained in the mind and does not slip away from our consciousness. Memory is related to the ability to make images and is a fundamental quality of the human mind. It is that which distinguishes the human being from the animal kingdom.

Vivekananda writes, "When we see a thing, the particles of the brain fall into a certain position like the mosaics of a kaleidoscope. Memory consists in getting back this combination and the same setting of the particles of the brain. The stronger the will, the greater will be the success in resetting these particles of the brain."

There are several implications of the concept of memory. First, memory implies the past and so suggests the future. Foresight is the counterpart of memory. Pascal wrote, "To foresee is to rule." Second, memory implies the control of the present. It implies the power of 'viveka' or discernment, the ability to make decisions based largely on our experiences of the past. Third, memory implies attention and interest. There is no such thing as a bad memory but only one which lacks the faculty of attention and interest because all of us remember some things very well and if we analyze the reason, we find that it is because we have paid a lot of attention and interest and through the law of repetition, we have reinforced the images.

Memory can be conscious or unconscious, voluntary or involuntary. Everything that happens to us is recorded. Under hypnosis, people have remembered many things which they cannot consciously. It is therefore the faculty of recall that is in need of development. But here again, total recall is not what is desirable. In fact, in many of our lives, it is perhaps the art of forgetting that we need rather than the art of memory.

When Simonides wanted to teach the art of memory to the Athenian statesman, Themistocles, the latter cried out, "Teach me not the art of remembering, but the art of forgetting, for I remember things I do not wish to remember, and I cannot forget things I wish to forget."

Vivekananda elaborates on this universal problem: "The danger of concentrating the mind upon an object and then being unable to detach it at will ... causes great suffering. Almost all our suffering is caused by our not having the power of detachment. We must learn not only to attach the mind to one thing exclusively, but also to detach it at a moment's notice and place it on something else. These two should be developed together. This is the systematic development of the mind. 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 practice concentration and detachment." (6.38)

The danger to the human condition is that since impressions are all recorded, they work unconsciously. As we are not aware of them, we are not aware of their operation in the undercurrents of our mind and often we wonder why we do certain things, why we react to certain people the way we do. "Every thought that we think," cautions Vivekananda, "leaves such an impression on the mind-stuff, and even when such impressions are not

obvious on the surface, they are sufficiently strong to work beneath the surface, subconsciously ... This is really what is meant by character ... If good impressions prevail, the character becomes good; if bad, it becomes bad. If a man continuously hears bad words, thinks bad thoughts, does bad actions, his mind will be full of bad impressions and they will influence his thought and work without his being conscious of the fact. ” (1.54) So we must become conscious of what lies submerged. As nature undulates with mathematical periodicity, so also do our thoughts.

We must therefore learn to synthesize our experiences and learn from the past. Any experience, whether it is good or bad, has a lesson in it for us. If we extract the lesson and learn to remember it, the experience ceases to be good or bad but rather instructive. These thoughts and impressions move like waves. When we can watch them dispassionately we find a maturity of mind emerging. To the extent that we have been able to synthesize the past and learn from our mistakes, to that extent we are able to control the present and hence our future.

In the teachings of the Holy Mother, we find the following instructions concerning this. She advises that at the end of each day, we must examine ourselves and see what we have done; whether we have done anything wrong. If so, we must imagine that in a future event of a similar kind, we will act differently. We must visualize ourselves in this light, because in a future occasion, the mind draws on the stored images. We cannot erase the contents in the book of experience, but we can add the appendix of wisdom.

In this regard, the Holy Mother taught, “The mind is everything. It is in the mind alone that one feels pure or impure. A man first makes his own mind guilty and then sees another’s fault. Can you injure anybody by enumerating their faults ? You only injure yourself. If a person does even a trifle for me, I try to remember even that.”

What is being alluded to here is a fundamental law of the human mind: the law of association. The mind is like a magnet which attracts to itself all the thoughts and images associated with the thought held in the mind. So in recalling evil, we invite misery. In recalling good, we invite the good, the holy, the uplifting thoughts to enter our mind and energize our being. Based on this fundamental law, meditation is prescribed by all saints and sages across the centuries of time as the most effective way to deal with the world and ourselves.

The concept of a mantra combines all three laws of memory to focus the mind. By

continuously repeating an idea and contemplating its meaning, we let no other thought intrude so that all ideas associated with it converge into our mind and make it luminous. Contemplating beauty, we become beautiful. Contemplating Truth, we become truth. Contemplating strength, we become strong.

So we are not after the superhuman power of the supercomputer which can remember everything and anything. We want to remember that which is edifying, unifying and uplifting, both to ourselves and to others. In this way, our vision becomes cosmic.

Indeed, on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Sri Krishna reminded Arjuna of his duty, of his real nature and of the interdependence of existence. At the end of the Gita, Arjuna sings, “Nashto moha smritir labdha, Tvat prasadan maya acyuta, sthito smi gata sandheha, karishye vacanam tava.” Destroyed is my delusion, I have regained my memory through your grace, My doubts are dispelled, I will carry out your command.

Let us remember our goal. Let us remember our divinity. Most important, let me remember to finish on time.